

我的...不是你的
「mine and now yours」



oli johns

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閻羅王出告示

老狐狸

老狐狸

VOID GALAXIA

OLI JOHNS

CHAPTER 1



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time loss

-< shea butter fatigue

shifting

hazed-out

bullet hole seven inch Mostar wretch in flak call >//

warlord to public face uncle if fond of shoulder pain symptom bigger than other

symptom cover up with moon base >/

tech walk in slumped side lean on L'Avenir Gallo grin point up VR

stub claim associate why

zaum so zaum real grammar fox syntax opposite check data boot /<<

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thought it was hydrogen forgot

two-thirds citrine max, scary

should've worn Ellesse

jacket <</

fuck in Bosnian slang dark forest not a deer that one sorry

Bosniak + >>

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'Killed them.'

No.

'Killed my family.'

Hmm, not strong enough.

'Murdered them...my family.'

Weird. Off-tone ending.

'Murdered...my entire Bosniak family.'

Too detailed. Too much family. Entire?

'Murderer...of Bosniaks.'

Better. Shades of Keith D. Death count too broad?

‘Murderer. You.’

Hmm.

Letting out a rough ‘*gab*’ of dissatisfaction, Enis looked down at the shallow pool of water left in the sink, tutted at the pea-green gunk swirling around on top then went back to the mirror and assessed. A short, librarian-looking Bosnian man sponsored by low-tech, reflection-makers Gravlox. Bags holding up eye blobs, weak chin, coat-hanger shoulders.

Franju on a fucking bike rack, was this really how he appeared?

Shoulders...he was sure they’d been broader before the blob shift. But now there they were, stark and sloped, plugged into the morgue light of this aggressively retro bathroom.

Would it be a problem? Visually?

He pictured the primates in the back room, shoving *prebrenac* down their throats; bricklayer frame, quarter-melon biceps, brains the size of diced peanut shells.

No, too glib.

It’ll show on the face.

Ja, maybe.

Dimming out the scene [except the blue neon futurising the bathroom walls, way too fierce], Enis concentrated on breathing routine. First exhale, *murdered*, second exhale, *them all*. Plus bubble scene in head to add pathos.

Jedan, dva, tri...

‘Murdered...them all,’ he muttered, almost no breath, struggling to create an internal portrait of anything. ‘Slaughtered like pigs.’

Slightly smarter pigs

Smarter than

Close to smarter than

Flicking to void state, he pulled the old Makarov pistol from his jacket pocket, took a step back and aimed at the mirror.

‘Murdered them.’

Eyelids lifted and the blue-streaked reflection stared back, threatening him.
Hand straight, steady, more like a trained assassin than a...

Concentrate.

Smash the mirror.

Rip off the Gravlox sticker.

Calmer

Void state.

Focus.

The finger on the trigger started to shiver, followed by the wrist. A faint, almost undetectable layer of sweat materialised on the forehead. The enormity of what he was about to do became ~~realistic real~~ actualised.

After almost two and half hours.

‘Murdered all of them. You.’

+++

Closing the bathroom door with the tiniest of clicks, Enis headed back down the brown-lit corridor with all the ~~civil-war~~ Civil War photographs hung on the wall and into the main restaurant.

It was an odd place, 20th Century Yugoslav nostalgia mixed with those tritium ping screens that had been popular ten years ago. Almost like the owner had two heads with two different tastes, and was therefore unable to do what most Serbian owners did in situations like these – shoot the one disagreeing.

But Enis knew that wasn't right.

There was only one head in this place.

A diseased, clotted one.

Cocooned by the dregs of the local militias.

He walked past the tables, careful to avoid knocking any imitation-flak jackets off the back of chairs, keeping his occasional coughs low and into the sleeve.

None of the diners bothered to look up as he simply wasn't worth noticing, just an average Bosnian guy there to patch in and self-glamourize like the rest of them.

They didn't know there was a gun in his pocket. Or what he planned to do with it. Even the two uniformed security guards didn't clock him as he passed through into the next room, the *VR Palace* as the sign called it.

Must really look like a gamer, he thought, putting a hand inside his jacket pocket and turning it quickly into a chest rub when he saw one of the goons from the second line of security glance over. That or the lights have been trimmed so low it's impossible to see who anyone is.

Injecting a shot of Ubikian paranoia, he slowed his pace and hovered near a group of four, poorly-bearded wretches plugged into the *Siege of Sarajevo* server. All zoned out, eyes technically open and blinking intermittently, but minds ninety-eight per cent elsewhere.

Busy murdering my Bosniak family slunk into his head as he skimmed over their army fatigues, but there was no emotion attached to it.

How could there be?

He hadn't been there personally, he'd never seen the bodies...these were not the men who murdered them...just cowards who wanted to simulate it. Patching in and pretending like they could've had the balls to do any of that. Well, maybe the massacres, but with enemy militia loons shooting back at them? No chance. *Courage in its horizon state* as that fucking no chin Thai hologram would say. Or was it Assta? Definite recall of flickering, female form, could've been either one of now that he...

'Which server?' broke in from the left, a rough voice.

Enis blinked and saw the same security guard who'd glanced over a moment ago now blocking his path.

Frankencop.

Action-stopper.

He pictured a stick figure slow-fading into the atmosphere of Neptune, shrieking acid Serb, then slipped a clear hand inside his jacket pocket and fingered the barrel of the gun.

Murdered my family.

You.

By loose association.

Probably your uncle or your dad.

‘That one,’ he replied, hand back out, voice wavering a little. ‘*Pluto 2270.*’

The security guard followed his finger, unnecessarily squinting at the sign on the hardware when the picture of the ex-planet was about the size of his own head.

Clearly not a gamer himself.

‘Why are you here?’ he asked, turning back.

‘Immersion haze.’

‘*Shtub?*’

‘Toilet break, still a bit dizzy...’

The guard looked at Enis’ forehead for a few seconds then grunted and moved to the side. It was hard to know for sure if the sweat layer was visible, but it felt like it should be.

Dial it back a bit.

Gamers don’t sweat that much.

Void state.

Focus.

Watching the gorilla disappear into the *face* part of the restaurant, he resumed movement, ostensibly heading for the *Pluto 2270* server, but choosing a route round the other tables that would also take him close to the back room.

The place where the butcher sat.

He brought his lungs under some measure of control, as much as he could within context, ignored the groans coming from pervs engrossed in *Harem Survival 4* or *5*, and evaluated the door ahead.

Only two guards, both half asleep.

The door itself probably unlocked.

Ja, that’s the way it was when you owned almost one third of the surrounding district. Superficial protection with no detail. And why not? Only a lunatic would try anything, a raid or a stunt-cut, and the butcher probably knew all the lunatics in the area already.

Hired a lot of them too, he thought, letting out the beginning of a laugh and quickly filtering it into a cough.

Dim it.

He murdered your family. Bosniaks.

Massacred them.

In the magic hour.

Void state.

Focus.

Swerving away from the *Pluto 2270* group, Enis walked with the words *pink massacre* in his head past the two security guards, and prodded open the door. The smoothness of his action seemed to convince the two gorillas that he was going where he was supposed to, their faces not even glancing up as he went through.

Gah, maybe they really were asleep.

What a stroke of luck.

Enis let them doze, continuing on into a smaller, marginally less dim dining area, where about two dozen psychopathic men [and six women] were eating a generic assortment of sushi and sashimi, some of them using a fork. As for security, there were two immediately discernible; one wolfing down a burger on a plastic table, alone, face lit up demonically by the green bulb directly above, and the other over by the fake palm tree, giving one of the waitresses a shoulder massage.

Neither one paid him any attention.

Ah, Serbian ex-military.

Best that butcher money can buy.

Apart from Angolans.

Or Magyar.

Or those US types who always seemed to come from Alabama or Arkansas.

Or the Russians who didn't...

Pinching the back of his neck, he scanned the rest of the room.

On the table by the far wall, a Sumerian nut sack of a man with eyes buried deep in shadow sensed the intrusion and stared back, three fries impaled on his chopstick. Enis locked eyes, double-checking to make sure it was the right guy. Normally, it would've been tough, most elderly Serbians looked alike, but this one

had a table-sized portrait of himself dressed up as Prince Marko on the wall directly behind, so there was no real doubt.

Time to act, he told himself, letting the legs carry him forward.

For all these wretches to see

Before blinding.

Taking a sip of something red with his spare hand, the old man watched intently as Enis maneuvered around and between the other tables, making his way deeper into enemy territory. Aware of the surveillance, Enis stopped a few times, slapping the back of his head and swaying slightly in mock confusion.

Fucking butcher knows.

Don't wait, just shoot.

Slowly.

Ja, draw it out, let him know.

Make him feel it.

Deciding on something between the two, Enis came to a halt two feet away from the old man's table, pulled out the gun and pointed it at his target.

No words came to mind except weak zaum poetry, so he stared at the French fries stacked on the end of his target's chopstick, vaguely aware of movement around him.

Talk.

Shoot.

Kill.

Fluctuate.

Do something.

Obeying in the worst possible way, his hand started to shake. The gun had little choice but to follow suit.

The old man nodded, muttered *clown* in Serbian, and bit the French fries stack in half.

'You murdered my...?' Enis tried to say, but was cut off by two guards side-tackling him to the floor. The gun tumbled under the table and his face took three

clumsy punches before a huge pair of hands managed to get an inhumanly tight hold of his throat.

‘*Čekaj, čekaj, čekaj...*’ slurred the old man, half drunk.

The larger of the two guards – in a relative sense; the smaller one was at least six one and 250 pounds – stopped his claws mid-neck snap and slapped Enis on the cheek instead, forcing the poor man’s head round to the boss.

‘Murdered who?’ asked Prince Marko II in surprisingly clean English, putting down the chopstick.

Enis kept eyes steady on the target, but his breathing was another matter; it sounded like he was having an asthma attack. Sense memory? Possibly. Something before the abandonment perhaps. Whatever it was, it was suffocating. He tried to get out the words *Bosniak family*, but they just would not come.

Some of the diners found the interlude amusing and called for an impromptu wrestling match, while others shouted at the guards to shove a rock down his throat.

‘Rock sounds about right,’ agreed the ex-warlord, motioning to the smaller guard with a naked chopstick.

‘Wait...’

Enis looked up, seeing a dark-skinned man at the same table as the butcher, his voice heavily accented. If he had to guess, one of the rogue adventurers from Ghana, come to lease property in Belgrade. Or hawk those new wine-enhancing storage units.

‘Killing might be a bit much,’ elaborated the foreigner, picking up a piece of sashimi. ‘He’s clearly in an emotional state.’

‘*Da, naravno.* He just tried to shoot me.’

The foreigner shook his head [and chopstick]. ‘I’m not so sure. Seems more like immersion haze to me. Probably patched out next door and thought he was still in the game.’

‘This guy?’

‘Somehow took a wrong turn by mistake. Yes, look at him, the poor man can’t even breathe.’

The ex-warlord picked up a serrated knife next to his plate and pointed it at the door. ‘He walked over here calm enough.’

‘That may have been the haze part.’

‘And aimed a gun at me. Not a fake.’

‘Um...yes. The gun. That is...a little more difficult to explain.’

The foreigner looked at the hyperventilating lunatic with what looked like sympathy and poked at his stubble. Sensing an ally, Enis toned down the asthma attack and gave him the words he’d rehearsed: ‘This butcher murdered my family. Massacred them.’

‘Wait a second...butcher?’ The Ghanaian paused the stubble rub. ‘You mean you’re not actually-...’

‘Please.’

‘Ah, you are, aren’t you?’

‘Help me.’

‘Shit, I really thought you were a gamer. Immersion haze. That’s why-...’

The old man waved his hand through the air, almost clipping the foreigner on the side of the face. ‘Okay, okay, this isn’t a fucking trial.’

‘Sorry...my mistake. Guest confusion. Carry on.’

‘Oh...*may* I?’

‘Of course, of course. The floor is all yours, comrade.’

Ha, put on the glasses, Ghanaian Keith, you wretch.

Put on those glasses.

Put on all the glasses.

Choke on them.

‘Fucking coward,’ screamed Enis, shrugging off one of the guards before quickly being pinned down by the *smaller* one.

‘Shut him up,’ shouted the old man in gutter Serbian, throwing over the serrated knife tip-first. He turned to address the other diners, most of whom were riveted by the show. ‘Anyone squeamish go smoke outside for a minute. But no phone calls.’

Not a single body moved, not even the Ghanaian.

‘Okay. Close the door, up the music.’ The old man pointed over at one of the fringe diners, who duly obliged, then turned on the two guards. ‘What are you hovering for? Cut him.’

Grunting an affirmative, the larger guard grabbed the handle and placed the imitation-steel edge against Enis' neck.

'Murdered my family...butchering cowa-...'

'Torso,' interrupted the old man, picking up his chopstick and stabbing it through two French fries. 'Slowly.'

The guard adjusted to the new instructions and, without blinking, pushed the knife hard into Enis' stomach. Then drew it out and did the same to his left arm. Then his chest. Then his stomach again.

'Family...murdered...'

Finally, he ran it across the neck, just to shut the poor fool up.

'Dump it out back,' said the old man, spitting out pieces of the fries. 'Before the carpet stains.'

The two guards didn't bother with *yes, sir*, they just got on with it; the assistant going for Enis' legs, and the stabber trying to get a decent grip under the armpits without dislodging too much blood from the victim's-...

A sudden cough, followed by a stream of deep red.

Both guards reeled backwards, hands raised in baffled defence.

Half off the floor, Enis coughed again, more blood spurting out. He touched his throat and his stomach wounds and eked out *fuck* in a language no one understood.

'Stab him,' shouted the old man, first in Serbian, then in English, his voice breaking a little.

The larger guard picked up the knife and approached tentatively, almost apologetically, before thrusting the steel back into Enis' body, this time aiming at an imagined hollow between the ribs.

Enis waited for him to finish then examined the new wound. Clearly unimpressed, the Bosniak shifted his weight backwards and propped himself up against the nearest table leg.

'God, I'm bored,' he said, looking at the dull, spud-like faces staring back at him.

'*Kako...*'

'Can't even be bothered to gloat.'

‘*Shtub...*’

‘Too murky.’

The lights flickered, then stabilized into a brighter tone of green. At the same time, Enis’ pupils changed from the pale brown he’d used to seek revenge to something that could only be described as witch purple.

‘Bit bit better,’ he said, spitting blood on the carpet.

Reeling back in his chair - his throne - the old man reached inside his jacket pocket before spitting out ‘fuck’ in Serbian when he realized he hadn’t brought the gun with him. In blind panic, he grabbed the chopstick and waved it in the air, yelling at all the frozen dummies in the room to, ‘shoot the fuck, cut off its head, kill it!’

It would have been a routine order most days, an exhilarating one back in war time, but not now.

Because all the men [and three women] in the 90’s mafia room were floating six feet above the floor with their faces peeled off.

‘Demon,’ stammered the old warlord, jabbing the chopstick towards Enis, who was still sat on the spiraled carpet, wiping off some of the blood.

‘Ant,’ he replied, pupils glowing as the murderer’s windpipe burst out of his chicken neck and landed on what was left of the sashimi.

Then the orchestra came down.

Corpses dropping roughly where they’d been sitting a few seconds earlier.

Mutilated in the old civil war ways.

The foreigner stayed in his seat, trying to keep his posture steady, but the horror was too much. In his head, he rehearsed his excuses. *I tried to save you. I didn’t kill your family, he did. The man was a slob. I knew you were impervious to knife wounds. How about a wine-enhancing storage unit, no charge? Wab, I thought it was a play.*

Enis gave up on the blood and moved a hand up to his cheek, picking at the stubble. As he did so, his face changed, matching the lines and cracks of the foreigner’s until, finally, they were identical.

‘I’m not with him,’ the foreigner blurted out, grabbing the old man’s chopstick and holding it up as a shield.

‘No?’

‘Yes, yes, yes, not at all. I’m an adventurer, wine-storage, from-...no, wait, wait, I tried to save you. Just now. I spoke up, defended you.’

Glaring at the chopstick until it was long and saw-like, Enis spun it round and sailed it right through the man’s throat.

‘Barely,’ he muttered, in the foreigner’s own voice.

Bear Lee.

Almost not at all.

Not anything at all.

Barely did anything.

Barely a thing.

‘Barely did anything,’ he tried again, framing out each syllable.

The foreigner slumped down towards the tablecloth, missed the table, dropped lower.

Now a carpet corpse.

Looking at his death mask, definitely Ghanaian. Adventurist, as admitted.

Wah, the surprise factor on it.

Me?

At this hour?

But, Sir, I haven’t had a chance to seek out the immortality juice yet. Or hire futurists to warp my DNA. Or climb into the thirty-by-twelve womb simulation. Or do the deal of all deals in deal town. Or put my Serbian exchange in the pain cot. Or refinance my wife. Or buy the Vanderbilt sex diary. See where he put it and how, copy selected parts. Moisturize.

‘Barely barely barely did fuck all of anything...’

Enis reached up to the table rim and felt around until he found the plate of fries. Pulling a handful down, he wiped off some of the blood and shoved them deep into his mouth.

Lukewarm.

Burgers were probably the same.

Fucking Serbian chefs.

Gangster cuisine.

Pulling himself up onto his feet, he grabbed a napkin, wiped the messier parts of his shirt and did a tour of the battlefield.

Massacre site, if he were being pedantic, but that implied vulnerable people who didn't deserve it whereas these...things...should've had their faces ripped off years ago.

And now they had.

By him.

He paused next to a table by the door. There was a phone with the screen still lit up. Sitting down, he translated it from Serbian to Bosnian and started to read.

Franju only joined the production after sending a video of herself standing inside the prison cell of Antonio Gramsci, reading out Wretchko's monologue from the Moon Prison helium mine escape scene.

Moon Prison?

Was that a game?

He opened up a new tab and searched the name, and laughed when he saw it was a philosophical sci-fi novel from the early 20's.

Fucking humans and their *L'Avenir*.

And set in the Kuiper Belt too.

At least part of it.

The door opened nearby, one of the gamers walking in with his head bobbing, mouthing *wrong zone* when he saw the flayed bodies on the carpet and tabletops, then calmly turning and walking back out.

He even closed the door behind him.

Waste of a brain, thought Enis, lodged in his seat, scooping up some loose sashimi, reading the full summary of *Moon Prison*, whistling at the denouement, putting the phone down and admiring the view, then going back to the gamer who'd just walked in and his waste of a brain line and

what was he playing

the Harem thing?

Pluto 2270?

He leaned down and picked up a rogue Serbian face, twirling it fairly poorly on his finger

tried a few more times then

got up

kept it in hand

walked out into the middle room, the *VR Palace*, located the gamer he'd just seen and sat down on the empty seat next to the zoned-out little wretchko.

Picked at some of his food.

Watched his cheeks twitch.

Called him *a rat in the castle sewage*.

Leaned closer and slapped him.

Ran his tongue over his lips.

Touched his crotch.

Pulled out what passed for a dick and held a fork to it.

Whispered in his ear that it was hauntological.

The dream of an already dreamt dream.

Helio-wave.

Then drew blood.

The two security guards didn't do a thing cos the purple had put them to sleep as he drifted past and no one else noticed as they were busy fucking onsen girls in *Harem Survival 4* or sniping unarmed Bosniaks in the sad fuck military jaunt and

even if they did notice

he'd just kill them

cos they were pieces of shit too

worse than that fucking Ghanaian adventurer

and his half-hearted intervention

the sad excuses

his pitiful dreams of

CHAPTER

2

ANNOYED IN SAIZERIYA

Some questions for you, Tsukubashi-San:

- *Why did the Ondōans appear to you?*
- *Why did they bring you back?*
- *Is the wormhole still there?*

I stopped.

Is the wormhole still there?

It was a petulant question. And a non-catcher. I mean, who would know otherwise? The Russians? They never said anything.

The Chinese?

A kid ran past, patch hanging drunk from his temple, howling at something. I turned to the other side, took in the calmer drones.

The Chinese...yeah, they'd be out there soon, they'd tell. Unless they did a pivot to Mars...nestled in with the adventurers, set up their own farms, their own lithium mines, overworked YA-BOTs...

Or maybe further...Ceres, the Jovian Belt...Planet X-Bvvv2657...

Two tables down, the waitress appeared, struggling with two bowls of imitation shark fin soup. Hadn't really noticed when I came in, but she looked quite

pretty in those green and white stripes. Small-circle lips, nice eyes, real eyebrows, none of that pencil-liner shit.

I watched with my Tsukubashi questions in the foreground as she put the bowls down and said something to the two teens opposite. Both were zonked out, pupils Jupiter-sized, though one did muster enough awareness to lean forward an inch and peek down her shirt.

Sneaky little perv. Delusional too. Clown looked like he was still in Form Five. And the waitress...had to be at least two years out of high school. No way she'd go for that, unless she really wanted to spend all her free time watching him sit on a plaza couch...glazed-over *kasu* look in his eyes. And not even a plaza, more like one of the backroom places, or a youth group server...or even here in Saizeriya, her own fucking work place.

Nah, what she needed was someone older, brighter, someone who could at least take her to a barr without getting ID'd. Fuck her without leaking beforehand. Impress her with unni stories. Defend her against pervs looking down her work shirt.

A noise from the other table, drawing me back to my own.

Soup bowl was empty. When she came over, say something, get her number? The napkin, write it down there?

I looked at the Tsukubashi mess on the tissue, turned it over.

The pen hovered an inch above.

She'd see the questions too. Should I? Was she really that pretty?

My eyes went up again and re-assessed. The Form Five perv was talking to her properly now, asking something. Couldn't hear it exactly, but I knew it was a question. As a supplement, he disconnected his patch, leaned forward and put a [probably] sweaty hand on her arm. For some reason, she didn't remove it. Just smiled again, professional.

My body shifted upwards, hand gripping the pen like a spear.

Attack, not attack...

Pros: wasn't far to their table, they wouldn't be expecting it, both were young and skinny, one was patched out almost transparent blue.

Cons: there were still two of them, the drone would wake up when his friend got hit, it was a public place, too many people watching, cameras.

By the time I'd waded through the whole list, things were already resolved. The waitress had finally stacked up enough irritation to push the kid's hand off her arm, saying something with a Russian-looking face before heading off to a friendlier table.

Ha, good for her.

I lowered the pen and stared at the perv a while longer, hoping he'd look over and try something.

He didn't.

Instead, he prodded his friend, dragging him back to wretch reality, and the two started to chat out loud. Louder than the ether-wave track seeping out the ceiling.

Typical fucking teens.

Annoyed looks from the table to the left, also teens, made me modify a bit: typical teens with low self-esteem, not the other, more balanced ones sitting over there. Yeah, clumsy phrasing, but fairer. And I was a fair guy. After all, I'd been a teen once upon a time...almost three years ago.

A sudden shout, not a word but a *WAH* sound.

The perv's friend.

I looked around for some kind of reaction, but the *better teens* were already on their way to the cashier, and pretty much everyone else on this side of the restaurant was patched in. A whole third of Saizeriya, lost in some franchise sandbox. Fuck. Why even bother coming out?

Clearly emboldened by the lack of pushback, the bigger of the two kids started playing with the sugar tin, throwing it up close to the ceiling and catching it at the last millisecond with his left hand. On the fifth go, the fucking idiot dropped it, breaking the lid off and scattering a mini-blizzard across the floor.

The man sitting on the table behind them turned and said something - shut up, I'm trying to eat, maybe - but the clowns didn't care. Couldn't catch the exact words, but I'm pretty sure they told him to slob off to another table.

Kuso.

Fucking cheek...

I waited to see if the guy would bite back, even though I knew he wouldn't; looked too much like an academic to pick a fight with anyone. No patch, Crystal Cliff jacket, grizzled beard...

Yup, right again.

The professor mumbled something, flicked at his neck and went back to the quantum mechanics book. Bigger of the two kids stared at the top of the academic's head for a while then tapped the seat cushion, laughing.

My pen became spear-like again.

Sorry, Ryu, big brother, but there's one concession I'm gonna make to those fascist fuckers. Kids out of control need the metal ruler treatment.

The napkin flipped over, pen down.

Make them scared of adults again.

Or the Battle Royale method? Only difference being, we wound instead of kill them...

Too much?

Send them to Ikebukuro.

Edit: send them to Yosh, see what he makes of their noisy shit.

Or even better, send them to the moon and make them do-...make them dig for resources...sweat their brains out down in the helium mines or...

No, too rewarding.

People like that don't deserve space or the moon...

Neither do convicts or rich people or venture capitalists or tycoons or adventurers or power-hungry motherfuckers or those Serbian guys who cut off heads or...any of that trash..

Only scientists and humanists and anarchists and charity workers and...

Me?

Am I part of it?

An image of a small boy with a tiny towel came into my head, face bleeding, tiles on the floor blood-streaked, my hand-...

I turned the napkin back over and re-read the notes on Tsukubashi-San. Edited the second question to 'Why did the Ondōans say they brought you back?' instead of the more direct, original one.

How would Tsukubashi have answered then?

I imagined him revived and sitting opposite, in a *Can-D* jacket and that *I pissed about in a wormhole* grin on his face. He was uncomfortable immediately. Looking around and seeing patched-in faces, patched-in kids, those two annoying teens...he started to sweat.

No, couldn't have him here. Too weird.

I reconstructed myself moving instead, back in time and over to the old UK, landing at the airport, driving to...where did he live? London? Where in London? I'd seen it on the documentary, *Glimpse of Ondōa*, it was on the fringes somewhere, a small house with a lawn and imported bonsai trees and he was hanging the washing out on the balcony with his wife. Then I pulled up, and he saw me from the window, saw that I was Japanese, so he came over, asked who I was with, and I said three letters JBA, which he seemed sceptical of, but then I showed him a badge, a variation of the CIA one, and it got me an invite into his house and then the living room, where he sat down on the most comfortable chair, one that reclined, whereas I got one brought out from the kitchen, a tiny, plastic thing. We sat down and he started talking first, about Japan, his chronic headaches, the flaws he still wanted to fix on *Beyond the Rabbit Hole*, then things blurred and skipped and I was pulling out my napkin, this napkin, and asking the three questions. How would he answer? I paid careful attention for squirming, but he didn't budge, just sat and smiled like...like the MC in *Void Galaxia*, Captain Eto, a confident smile, *you treat all your heroes this way* kind of smile, and answered:

'Accident. They just did. Very much hope so.'

I looked at the questions on the napkin to correlate the answers and then noticed the bowl was gone.

Kuso, when did that happen?

My head shot up, scanning the scene. The two teens were missing. Sugar on the floor had been cleared up. My waitress crush...was behind the register, taking money from a guy in a *Platonic Jazz* t-shirt. Meanwhile, Tsukubashi-San, his living room, his house and the fringes of London had all vanished.

I tried to bring him back but, for some reason, all I could think of was a generic astronaut on a derelict ship...and a face-hugger trying to break through the guy's helmet.

Huh?

Alien?

The 70's one?

My head went back down, the image of the alien soaking for a while before giving way to other parts of the film I vaguely remembered, my brain making up new parts, new scenes, new areas of the ship, sparing characters that died, killing characters that didn't.

By the time I got to Ash sucking off Yaphet Kotto, a different, greyer waitress had materialised at the end of my table, asking if I wanted more coffee. After staring blankly for a few seconds, I managed to shake my head, vaguely pointing to the self-service buttons on the wall.

'You're welcome,' she muttered in response.

'What?'

'Press the button if you need more.'

'Yeah...I know.'

She smiled not at all convincingly and moved on to the next table.

Half-watching her play out the same scene with that customer, I fished out a new napkin from the box nearby and wrote another question, a random one that had just popped into my head.

- *Why is the alien in 'Alien' black?*

And then another, a consequence.

- *Why does the alien kill Yaphet Kotto? Racial subtext?*

The topic took me in again, loading up fragments, scenes, alternate turns and longer conversations, the dinner scene lasting a full hour, Yaphet dodging the alien's tail, bigger guns, unbreakable helmets...then air.

Dropping the pen, I looked at the clock on the wall, figuring there hadn't been too much time wasted on this thing.

Wrong.

It was ten past one.

My brain had been lost in *Alien* for nearly an hour.

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Outside, everything was dead. Desolate. The light from the neon hanging two floors up covered the commercial side of the street, showing me how depressingly familiar it all was. The opposite side, the shadowed parts, had all the residential shacks. Or potential residential shacks as the lights were never on and no one ever seemed to come out.

Maybe they were all patched in?

Or dead.

Seven month old corpse discovered by squatters, patch still glued to temple.

It happened sometimes.

To poor people with dodgy equipment. And no friends.

I lit the last cigarette from my pack and smoked half of it while staring at the green haze above Ito Yokado.

There was Kayo Mauve holding a baseball bat, telling me the universe was mine. Next to her was a holo-pic of the new Kem-4 VR pod hovering above what looked like the snow peaks near Nagano.

That was the universe?

Kuso.

I finished the cigarette and thought of the real universe. Billions of stars and moons and planets and space stations and black holes and...and countless other shit I'd never get to see.

Goddamn Tsunashima, what was the point?

Goddamn unii, what was the point?

Goddamn...Japan.

What was the point of any of it compared to all that...everything up there?

I walked to the edge of the road and crossed, looking up. When I got to the other side, my head turned back to check for cars or bikes or pods, but there was nothing.

Back up to the stars then.

That mesmeric, infinite sandbox. Billions of planets waiting to be explored...to have the first Saizeriya or Ito Yokado planted on their soil, ha. Even this solar system here, the ridiculous size of it...Pluto, Eris, Kuiper Belt, the blue of Neptune, the weird axis of Uranus, the insane radiation of the Jovian Stretch, Mars, Mercury, wreck of the Soviet Venus probe, Chu's shiny blue portal to the Helix Nebula that would, three times out of ten, tear your ship apart.

And then there was the Moon...only thing we'd actually put boots on. And future mining colony/concentration camp, if the adventurers got their way.

Something on the street shimmered, grabbing me.

A large foyer window in one of the residential shacks, completely dark [apart from the usual loan shark posters].

One Man's Moon [a scene on a window]...

The residential blocks across the street shuffled closer and a huge glass dome came down behind them. Their lights were still bright. In the sky, spaceships went up and came down, taking wantaways out, bringing optimists in. A couple walked by on the street, the man's arm tight around the girl's shoulder...what was she, fifteen? Wah, there were no limits anymore, not when guys were swooping that low. She let his hand slouch down onto the top of her chest, and he started making circles, enjoying himself. Would my scene have people like that in it? Fuck it, let them stay...for now.

Better to have muck and sleaze than puritans.

Wasn't it?

To a degree. But numbers weren't that important, spirit was.

Community.

I pulled out of the scene and made a mental list of all the Space filmns I could think of where the numbers were low.

- *Beyond the Rabbit Hole*, of course.
- *Alien*
- *Void Galaxia*
- *Silent Running*
- *Infinite Atom Mall*
- *Red Dot Moon Grip*
- *Enemy Mine*
- *Blue Star Misty*
- *Event Horizon*
- The one about thirty years back, with Sanada-San as Captain...
- *Portals & Portals*
- *I'm All Alone In The Kuiper Belt And That's Okay*
- *Solaris*

That was it, all I had.

The loneliness filmns.

Each one an unattainable nebula.

Beautiful nebula.

Empty.

But still beautiful.



Turning another corner, I saw *Ghost Park* across the road and set course. The two teens from Saizeriya were there, drinking megalith cans of Asahi, smoking with amateur technique, dangling their arms off the swing chains like monkeys.

I strolled over and sat down on the swings opposite. One of the chains was hanging down lower than the other, but that was normal. As was the graffiti scrawled on the padded ground claiming, *NO KIDS ALLOWED*. Ha, it was true, the only kids who came here were the ones too young to patch in to *Kanto Land*...or those slippers-outdoors types, struck with luddite parents pining for the old days.

Pushing off the ground, I let myself swing lopsided, eyes switching back to the two giant toddlers.

The taller kid, the sugar tin-throwing perv, had finished his can and was now crushing it awkwardly with his right hand. Mumbling something, the other kid swatted it onto the ground, gave a quick stamp, then kicked the remains at the slide to the left.

‘Way off,’ the taller one yelled back.

‘You didn’t fucking crush it right, *kasu*.’

I pulled up the sleeve of my shirt and stared at them. Neither one had the balls to stare back.

Fucking teens, always loud, always cans.

They talked some more. About Ikebukuro and the things they were doing there. Or the things other people they kinda knew were doing there.

Ha, kinda knew?

Fucking liars. Story-tellers. You wanna know about Ikebukuro, take a seat...take a swing, I'll tell you.

But what was the point?

Fucking kids.

Fucking Tsunashima.

I turned away and pushed off from the ground, going back to *Alien*. That scene, Yaphet Kotto and the alien.

What was it exactly?

Nothing, only dialogue.

Kotto to the alien: 'Fucking liar.'

What did that mean?

I hadn't seen *Alien* in years, and even then it wasn't the greatest space film ever...definitely not in the same league as *Rabbit Hole*. Why the hell was I thinking about this?

One of the kids shouted something, seemingly targeted at someone.

I turned, hoping it was me, and saw the two of them standing near a homeless guy who had appeared out of nowhere.

Wah, he was a mess...slumped on the ground, spine half inside a hedge, one of those Baltic revolution hats covering most of his forehead. For some reason, his trousers were rolled up to the knees, left hand scratching the shin.

The two kids shouted at him again, the usual shit. *Get a job. Fucking drunk, fucking leech. Do something, don't just sit there, old man.*

The homeless guy ignored it all and switched nails to his other shin.

'You braindead, homeless?'

'Kick him, Yasu.'

'Yeah, I will.'

'Kick him, go on.'

'He fucking deserves it.'

'Fucking drunk, fucking leech.'

Betraying his own rhetoric, Yasu didn't kick the guy. Instead, he did what all cowards do and stood there like a shopp dummy, shouting the same insult on loop.

I waited another minute to see if they'd give up and move on, but they didn't, so I got off the swing and rolled up my sleeve. The two of them weren't that much younger, that was true, but they were about four inches shorter, and there was no way on this planet they'd go up against me.

At least that was the theory.

I started walking towards them, keeping my face cold Russian.

'Yasu...'

'What?'

'Incoming.'

'Income? *Kuso*, what you on about?'

'Some guy is coming. There.'

Yasu looked. I was right. They stood their ground for about three seconds then shuffled slowly back to their coward swings as I got closer.

'What's up, *teme?*' Yasu said. 'You friends with the drunk or something?'

I stopped near the homeless guy and stared at them.

'What?' came back in unison, the smaller guy's voice cracking. 'The fuck are you looking at?'

I kept staring.

'What you doing, *teme?*'

'I think he's broken.'

'Yeah...'

'Full of shit.'

'Yeah...'

I kept staring.

'You broken, *teme?*' Yasu asked.

'Yeah, what's up with him?'

I didn't answer.

'Hey...you in there?'

'He's weird, Yasu, leave it.'

'I'm talking to you, *teme*. What you doing?'

I took two steps toward them.

Yasu didn't move, but the other one nearly fell off his swing.

'What?' he yelled, voice buffering a bit.

'Yasu...let's just go...this guy's weird.'

'What the fuck are you looking at, *kasu*?'

'Picking on the homeless, *abazure*...' I said, calm as a spring-time monk,
'...is fucking childish.'

'*Kuso*...' The kid was about to say, *what you gonna do about it?* I knew he was,
so I started walking towards him, balling my fists.

'The fuck, *kasu*? What you doing?'

'Don't talk back, *abazure*.'

'Stop being weird.'

'*Manko*.'

'Back off.'

I got closer, another few steps and I'd have him.

'Hey, back off.'

'Nope.'

'Back off, *kasu*...what the fuck?'

I shook my head, sliding a hand inside my blood red YONEX jacket,
pretending to search for a knife. At least that's what I assumed they were thinking.
Didn't really matter, fists or blade, I only needed to put down one of them.

The other kid couldn't take it and started heading out of the park. He got to
the wooden gate with two broken planks – two years and no sign of a repair team -
and called back to Yasu, telling him to leave it alone, I wasn't worth it. Yasu looked at
me [already off the swings and a few yards back], spat on the ground and walked after
his friend. I chased his tail a little until he was out of the park then stopped.

Predictably, when they were far enough away not to be caught, they shouted back,
calling me a fucking dead man, fucking cunt, fucking *kasu* etc.

Pulling the hand out of my jacket, I went back to the homeless guy. Wah, he was still scratching his shin. Did the last five minutes not happen?

'Hey, you okay?' I asked him, slouching a little.

No answer.

'You know, you shouldn't sit in parks on your own. Don't you have any friends you could group with?'

He stopped scratching and looked up, smiling like a loon. 'Used to be good. Had a building, conjured up science.'

'Okay, *teme*.' I looked out of *Ghost Park* and across at the conveni on the other side of the no-car road. As sure as night follows sun, the lights were on. 'How about I get you a coffee or some noodles? You hungry?'

'Not Japanese. Not. Notto.'

'Yeah, *teme*, I know the feeling.'

'The second mind-tower I made. Did it, finished, done. Here.' He jabbed the top of his head. 'Made the second mind-tower and it worked sound, very sound, and now I'm here and the sound one is over there, so so so far over there. Very wet. Very far.'

'Err...great.'

I decided that he was babbling nonsense cos he was hungry, so I walked out of the park the non-gate way, crossed over to the conveni and bought the second cheapest pack of noodles. Five minutes later I was back, sprawled out next to him, explaining a few ways I'd thought of to help him get out of this mess.

'See, if you create your own magazine, get some charity to subsidize it, the print version of it...then you'll have more passion when you sell it. Right? And it'd be miles more interesting than the shit they give you to sell. So, people would be more willing to buy it and...and you'd have more fun selling it too cos it'd be your baby. Right?'

He was scratching his leg again. The noodles remained marooned on the ground, untouched.

'And you could get people who buy it to go to a hub-site and leave comments or something. You could have a whole community, get other homeless

guys involved too and yeah, okay, it won't make any of you rich, won't get you a house or anything, but it's something, right? It'd give you a bit of cash and...some kind of creative purpose. At least something you can...hey, are you listening?'

Nope, not even the performance of it, he was too busy staring at a leaf on the ground.

'Seriously, *teme*, I'm not messing around here, this is good advice. They're doing it in Denmark and North Britain right now, I read about it. Liverpool, Edinburgh, the other ones...Glass something...that's where you should be, they treat guys like you better there. Community housing or something, an actual policy behind it. Not like here. This country doesn't do shit, just makes you feel like a wretch, but Scandinavia, you ever thought of that? Going there? Or Ghana maybe. I heard they have communal initiatives too. Don't know how true it is. But it's gotta be better than here. If you can afford the flight. I don't know. Maybe, a year or two, if you save a bit from the mag I told you to do. Maybe you could go.'

He glanced at me, smiled inanely then went back to the leaf.

'Okay, look, you should try and eat the noodles at least. They're good for you. Well, kinda. Better than eating nothing.'

He picked up the leaf, examined it then tore it in half and threw the two parts back on the ground.

'Hey, you listening...!' I picked up the noodles and waved them like a toy shuttlecraft in front of his face. 'I'm not doing this for fun.'

'Huh?'

He was finally looking at me.

'Hello?' I asked, double-checking.

'You don't do it for fun, ne?'

'Oh, you can see me now?' He smiled, so I continued on. 'Well, yeah, like I just said, I don't do it for fun. I'm trying to help you out here.'

'Yes, yes.'

'Actually, I'm under duress...kind of.'

'Duress?'

'Someone bigger than me...an anarchist.' I paused, thinking back. 'Well, he used to be bigger.'

He laughed and said, 'brother.'

'What?'

'Brother, brother, brother.'

I looked around the park for cameras in bushes or rubbish bins with antennae sticking out. How did he know that? Was he guessing?

'How'd you know that?'

No answer.

'Hey, how'd you know that...about my brother?'

He laughed again. 'Where's my science gone? Have you seen it? My old friend science, where's it hiding where? There where? Where there where there?'

I tried again to get an answer, but it was no good, he was gone. Not physically, just from the conversation. Not that it was much of one. *Kuso*. This is what my country did to people like him. It was no Denmark, that's for sure. Or Liverpool. Or Ghana. Or...

Dragging myself back to my feet and brushing dirt of the almost brand new YONEX jacket, I told him to eat the noodles before they got cold then left the poor bastard alone to do whatever it was he did at two in the morning in this empty, shitty, end of all lines *Ghost Park*.

Then stopped at the gate, flicked at a sign, walked back to the swings.

Sat down.

Swung back and forth a little, watching my project.

Waiting for the noodles to be eaten.

Thinking of Ghana.

Liverpool.

Denmark.

The homeless in tuxedos.

Max Von Sydow on the rocks, prodding a doll with a paintbrush.

Dick insert.

Fragmented castle shots.

Passageways without end.

A blonde black woman taking my hand, pinning me down on the stone floor.

Telling me they liked Japanese.

Me saying back I didn't.

The sex continuing anyway as a giant castle window pulled in a snow-scape that if I squinted looked a bit like the surface of Pluto and then the blonde black woman was by the door, suited up, asking about the graviton emitter and when I looked back at the landscape it wasn't window-framed anymore, it was present, surrounding me, and on a deckchair to the side was an alien, smoking a crooked cigarette, watching the nitrogen plumes in the distance, tapping a single toe against the-



...dimkest lit court room I'd ever seen, darker than *Tento's Horror Dome*, with Yaphet Kotto ordering me to the bench, without my lawyer, and before I knew it I was over there, staring up at him god-size above, blank-eyed, facially retrograde, listening as the alien-hassler recycled for the seventh time that I was guilty, amoral, hangable, and what did I have to say about that?

'Still not true.'

'Insufficient.'

'I didn't do anything.'

'Precisely. You failed to help him.'

'What? The noodles.'

'Not good enough.'

'But...'

'Where's your conscience, Keni?'

'Who?'

'You're guilty.'

'No...'

'You truly are.'

'I'm not...'

‘Don’t obfuscate.’

‘...there were noodles. Ob what?’

Something at the back of the court started emitting beeping noises and my hand
moved vaguely towards it.

Another few beeps and it stopped.

Kotto stared at me [and my hand] as if I were a necromancer then asked for an explanation of my actions that night. Stalling for time, I looked at the painting lurking behind, split into three panels, two men eating, something broken up in the middle, and then, accompanied by sudden industrial wires sprouting from the ceiling, the electronic screech from *Tetsuo* on the court speakers, my mouth opened and a new line crept out. ‘He wasn't a man. At all.’

‘Then what was he?’

‘Robot. He was a robot.’

In my hand there was a book, something about robot theory, and I had it open on a fixed page and was reading out loud, telling Kotto, telling the whole court that, ‘robot was a Czech word, associated with workers and-...’

‘He wasn’t a robot,’ Kotto said, punctured without shrieking noise by one of the
wires.

And then I had a homeless man in front of me and a knife in my hand and I was telling Kotto that more homeless men were robots than he realised, than anyone realised, and I was using the knife to cut open the homeless man’s arm, only now he wasn’t a homeless man, he was Ryu Murakami, and as the arm opened, wires came spilling out, lots of wires, so many wires, an impossible number of wires and I tried to pack them back in but there were too many so I gave up and dropped him and told Kotto that with all due respect I was right, I'd always been right, but he didn’t seem to care as he was picking up the hammer again, wrist leaking blood, bile, motor oil etc., and at the back of the court...beep, beep, beep...

BEEP BEEP BEEP

BEEP BEEP

BEEP

+++

Eyes open.

Sunlight, shadow, breath trail, fatigue...

I blinked a few times.

Shapes started to appear...outlines, details. Topside of a bed, wall with occasional cracks, alien planet-scape poster, unread books with pretty retro covers. The VR hardware with the *Moon Factory 7* card lodged inside. A few other game cards on the desk next to it.

Okay, got it now.

It wasn't a court, it was my room. No trial, no homeless robot men, no Yaphet Kotto telling me to...

Wait...

I picked my phone off the duvet, already aware it wasn't early. But maybe it wasn't quite as late as...

The numbers became clear.

Neon fucking *manko*...

One in the afternoon again.

I'd been hitting *snooze* for the last two hours.

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The communal bathroom was empty, exploited; hairs and fluff trodden into the tiles, razors and gels left in the sink, someone's towel balled up on the toilet seat. The rest of them must've left hours ago. Asami must've left hours ago. I peeked my head out the door and looked at the clock on the common room wall. *Kuso*, about five hours ago if they were all starting at nine.

Showering quickly, no guilt, I ordered some all-day breakfast on the wall-pad, paced around the common room for a while, scrutinized the credits on the

Hellevator poster Hide had put up, then went back to the bedroom and opened my bag.

There was nothing much in there, just Ryu's Anarcho-Communism book. I picked it up and skimmed through a few more pages, but, as usual, none of it stuck.

'I'm trying, Makhno-San,' I muttered, closing the book. It wasn't a complete lie. The last few weeks I'd kept it on hand, reading the first few chapters, trying to think up my own ideas based off what the author was saying. What was the name...Fahey? How the hell did you pronounce that?

Anyway, I was trying. It may have been in my possession for eight, nine years already, and I'd barely touched it until last month when the power was out for two days, but still...I was trying.

It's just...compared to the games...

'*Kuso*...Yosh.'

I threw the book on the bed and returned to the kitchen, getting there just as the breakfast arrived in the chute [with the dinner menu attached to the tray].

Feeling slightly embarrassed, I took it out to the common area and started eating. As always, the walls were deathly white, the *Hellevator* poster exhausted, and there wasn't much happening online or on the *Hey Muon* menu screen, so I went back to my room, loaded up my game card version of *Moon Factory 7*, stuck the patch on my temple, wolfed down the rest of the breakfast and then connected to the *better-than-anything-else-I-had* unii server.

Like the common area, the factory dorm was empty except for a few YA-BOTS, all reading the same book [*Red Dot Moon Grip*]. One that had actually been adapted into a real thing. Which was terrible. Yet still got compared to Tsukubashi's work.

Nodding at one of the bots who looked familiar, I put on a work jacket and headed to Ops. The day before there'd been a power outage, which turned out to be an act of petty sabotage orchestrated by the Nabians, and repairs had yet to be completed. That meant the turbo-shafts were off-line. Ah, didn't matter, I liked walking...even though I knew I wasn't actually walking...but that also didn't matter

as after twenty or so minutes of immersion you forgot you weren't physically doing any of those actions and the environment became real.

I turned right down the worm corridor, left at the pharmacy, left again, right at the rival pharmacy, past security, up the ramp and the stairs and into the main spiral the technicians used to get to Ops.

My eyes were open this time, but they didn't need to be; I'd spent so many hours in this game, I could've gone anywhere on the base with my eyes ripped out of their sockets.

Probably not a good thing - auto-recall, para-attachment - though not as bad as others.

I slapped down the voice in my head reminding me I'd just missed a whole day of lectures and focused on walking into Ops.

As expected, there was a skeleton crew of NPCs doing their programmed work at various consoles, so I nodded politely at a few of them and headed to the main view port.

A surprisingly well-lit moon-scape was spread out in the near distance, dotted with residential domes, imitation bael trees and block chains of factory estates that functioned as targets for capitalist intrigue.

It was a beautiful sight.

A depressing sight.

And, after another ten minutes, a quotidian sight. The objective reality for who my character was supposed to be.

I sat down on the assist-stool and stared out.

According to the log, the others would be back soon...back from their survey of the craters just south of the dome, and then it would be my turn. But I would do a different area, the northern outcrops maybe, or out by the hills on the east side, and I'd make sure I was gone before they got back, so I didn't have to communicate with anyone. Wasn't in the mood for that today. Unless Tomomi was with them...or Sachiko...or Rosie...

I tried to bring up the player roster in-game, but it just blinked 'LOADING' over and over. Probably the server struggling with my game card.

Didn't matter, I knew they weren't there. It was too early...they'd either be at lunch or on their way to afternoon lectures...not slumming in the dorms like-...

Something green streaked across the view port.

A console fell through the floor.

One of the background characters split in two and started chanting static gibberish.

All in rapid succession.

Fuck, again...

I held my right index finger against the palm of my left hand until the scenery faded.

Stupid, *keuso* tech.

Taking out the game card, I checked it for signs of obvious decay, even though I knew that was unlikely. *98% of malfunctions are internal, please do not attempt to tamper with the insides of the device.* That's what they always stamped on the packaging. Which was lucky as I had no idea how to open the thing up anyway.

Maybe it was the hardware, not the game? Or one of the software upgrades?

It was possible, Tomomi had been hit by a virus a few months earlier...but that had brought down her whole server. And all my other cards seemed to run okay.

Nope, I'd have to take it back to the Dragon Centre. The shop two doors down from Yosh's. And after that, another week before they bothered to fix it. Which meant I'd be stuck with the dorm version and its intermittent lag. And the lack of stealth mode.

Fuck, twenty minutes and glitch. After...what, two months?

Thanks a lot, Yosh.

Muttering some of my more creative swear-words [coined by *Chorror* probably], I packed up the breakfast materials and washed the fork I'd used on the egg. There were some dirty bowls in the sink, but I had neither the energy nor the generosity of spirit to wash them. Why should I? That was their mess, not mine.

Back in the common area, I picked up my bag and thought about where I was heading. Dragon Centre, that was the first thing. Put *Moon Station 7* in for repair,

if it was still salvageable, then swing over to Yosh and see if *Pluto 2280* was there yet. It was doubtful, but sometimes they got sent out early.

Putting the bag on my shoulders, I stood - object, abject, bored - and stared at the *Void Galaxia* poster on the door.

Time to go, Keni. You lazy wretch. Out into the sunlight.

I paced up and down the common area, unable to make myself leave. A cloud must've passed across the sun as the room went dark and, when I closed my eyes, the moon came back and I was in Ops again and there were the hills over on the east side that no one had been to yet, I had to go there, and...

The door opened and one of the others walked in. It was Hiroki, without a spacesuit. He nodded at me and asked if I'd been to lectures already, even though he knew I hadn't.

'Sick.'

'Oh, right.' He sucked in his lips, unsure what to add. 'Now?'

'Recovering.'

'Oh, right, okay.'

He walked past me towards the kitchen, nodding his head like a woodpecker. I had a feeling he was gonna come back out with the dust mop and do the floor, even though there was almost no dust on it, and that's exactly what he did.

I put my hand behind my back and balled a fist.

It wasn't enough.

'You don't need to do that, I did it earlier,' I told him, but he kept going, pushing the mop around me like I was some unmovable boulder.

Finally, he finished, putting the mop back in the kitchen.

When he came back out, he looked at the couch for a few seconds, then clapped his hands together and informed me that he had work to do in his room and should probably get started on it right away.

'Good idea,' I said back, already moving towards the exit.

As soon as he saw the mess in the bathroom, he'd get the mop out again, and have that head on him like he was a sweat-shopp worker in Poland or something, so I moved quickly out the door and down the stairwell.

+++

Outside the block, there were some more students coming back from lectures. None of them seemed to notice me, but I pulled my phone out and pretended to send a message just in case.

It worked.

Social interaction avoided.

I kept walking, ignoring the dorm greenery. By the corner of the bike rack, there was a cockroach lying on its back with its tiny legs paddling in the air. For some reason, I thought of Hiroki, though I wasn't sure why. I had a feeling I just wanted him to be like that, a...what was the word? Figative? Fictative? No...figative, that was it. A figative cockroach.

+++

As usual, the train ride was bleak.

Grey clouds merging beyond the windows, hospital lighting inside, everyone on board physically, spiritually done. The standing adults slumped on the rings, the kids just off school eerily quiet, the pensioners annoyingly loud, the whole lot of them stuck to their screens, with a few diehards zoned out and patched in to view-only re-runs.

Fifteen more minutes to Jiyugaoka.

Not too bad.

I kept to the side and looked out at the cityscape. There were too many regular, functional buildings, too much open space, too much daylight despite the overhanging grey cloud canopy, so I thought of Hiroki again, in his room, on his computerr instead of patched in, doing things that would reach their end when he handed them in or presented them to the class, and then it would be onto the next thing, and what the hell did he even do anyway? My head said economics, but other parts weren't sure. I knew it had something to do with business and numbers, but

everyone in the dorm was doing something similar and not by the same name, so I could never place the person to their exact course. But I *was* sure Hiroki's one was economics.

Relatively sure.

Yeah, now I thought of it, it was. He put numbers into columns and made graphs and predictions out of them and it meant...what did it mean? Where would that put him in a hundred years? Who gave a fuck about economists, really? Would he have a memorial stone on his grave - 'Hiroki Kimura, whenever he died, note: he could do some slightly specialized shit with numbers' - was that something to remember?

The train pulled through a line of stations and I kept a vague eye on the lights on the map.

No, Hiroki wouldn't make much of a mark, and the rest of them were just as average, but what about me? Was it memorable to wake up at one in the afternoon? To scribble notes to Tsukubashi-San in Saizeriya and wander around Ghost Park?

I thought forward, a hundred years.

A Fahey-ian Utopia.

Scared adventurers.

Dead adventurers.

Then they'd have better things to think about. Maybe they wouldn't even have to look back and remember anything...I mean, what if they just suddenly got better at a load of things, like writing or art or film-making, and they realized they were better, so when anyone said, 'hey, look at all this stuff they did before, a hundred years ago,' people would just look at them and go, 'yeah, but that's shit, look at what we can do now.'

A nearby arm spasmed, clipping my knee.

Yeah, that's how it might turn out, I could picture it clear as Icelandic midnight. And they'd have spaceships too, cryogenics that would actually work, not that Takashi Miike head-in-an-ice-bucket shit, and they'd be going out to Mars and Jupiter, maybe even further...the Kuiper Belt, Oort Cloud...Alpha Centauri. Bright people crewing the ships, the brightest of the bright, selected and voluntary and-

...volunteers, was that right? Or convicts probably. Prisoners, fighters, army guys...psychopaths?

Kuso, a bunch of loons on a spaceship...how would that work?

The light on the map flashed, followed by the robotic train voice: 'Jiyugaoka, next stop.'

Kuso, don't even think about it, *teme*.

No flight, no space.

Not in my lifetime.

Unless they-...

No, not that either.

The Ondōans...they'd pick up scientists, Tsukubashi-San, great people, not a fucking wretch like me.

On the seats to the left, an old man dropped his phone, almost headbutting a schoolgirl's muff as he bent down to pick it up.

Okay, semi wretch.

Not that bad.



I stood with one elbow on the counter, next to a completely incongruous rolled-up stack of fiberglass, staring at the game posters on the nearby wall.

Robot Diablo [Argentinian]

Le Regle De La Jeu Medieval [French]

Harem Survival 4 [Iranian-Guangdong collab, ridiculously popular]

Kokoro no iron [One of ours]

The last one had the best art - a pretty realistic image of a heart being crushed by a giant metal claw - but the concept...way too generic. Young teens, robots suits, battles spilling over into high school girl changing rooms.

I heard a noise from the door and looked over, but it was something happening in the corridor outside.

Quick check on the back room doorway.

No Yosh shape.

Back to the posters.

Ah, *Harem Survival 4*...the one that finally took the subtlety away...played by gamers with absolutely no sense of shame or...

Another noise from the corridor, followed by a rough shout of *NOT THAT WAY, YOU SPOON.*

I tried looking out through the window, but there was too much promo paper stuff blocking the view. Just a head or two bobbing past, along with a couple more gutter shouts.

Kuso.

It was weird, the centre was fairly active, but none of it seemed to be spilling over into Yosh's place. Like someone had drawn a spirit circle in invisible chalk. There were one or two kids slumped on the VR *dentist* chairs in the corner, but compared to normal, the place was practically derelict.

A lighthouse on Sadoshima popped into my head. Dad taking our hands and leading us up the steps, warning me specifically not to get too close to the edge.

'You hear me, Keni? Not too close...'

'Yeah.'

'...and hands in. Not having any of your fucking around today, okay?'

'I'm not, I won't.'

'And don't nod, it's irritating.'

The scene continued for a moment then the steps turned into a rocket and the lighthouse turned into the moon and...

'Yeah, I know, but...'

I blinked and looked across to the back room doorway, expecting to see Yosh, but...nothing, it was blank. Huh? I looked around the shopp again, searching for the voice. Didn't take long. There was a kid in the *new titles* corner holding a game-card in one hand, phone in the other, ordering the person on the other end to get online and send him more credit, cos he wanted five right now, not one.

Ha, rich kids...judging by his tone, good chance he was talking to his helper. Or a feeble step-father. Definitely not his mum.

I listened to the little shit whine a bit longer then got bored and looked over at the dentist chairs again. Both those kids were deep under, still in their school uniforms, most likely paid up for the full [legal] three hour stretch. Any longer than that and you'd have to go to the back rooms. The nectar of Yosh's business. Or his boss's business. Sachida-San, the smiling leopard...grinning leopard...something leopard. Yeah, that business model. Get them hooked out front, then double the

rates once they pass through the curtains. About as ethical as a lithium mine, if you cared about that kind of thing.

Though, if Ryu knew Yosh was doing any of this, or who he was connected to, he probably wouldn't-...

No, not that way.

Stick to the present.

Pluto 2280.

I did another quick check of the back room entrance, still no sign of Yosh.

Back to the environment then.

Abject reality.

School wretches patched out on dentist chairs.

Running my eyes over the little shits, I tried to determine what it was they were lost in. Sometimes, there would be arm movements or vocalized outbursts that could give you a clue, but these kids looked like they were fast asleep. Maybe it was one of those spiritualist games where someone gave you a massage while softly describing the ley lines of the universe? Or a hide-in where you had to evade hunters for an hour?

Whatever it was, it definitely wasn't *Pluto 2280*.

Not enough murmuring for that.

'Fucking *keuso*, I said five, not two. Check your fucking ears.'

It was the rich kid again, demanding whoever was on the end of the line to get to it and send the funds. His voice was so grating that it made me look at the main door to see if there were any bigger kids coming in that might beat him up.

Nope. No one. Just the pocket-tyrant and the two koalas.

Wah, three kids in the whole shopp.

After school hours.

It really didn't make sense...where were they all? It's not like they didn't want to play, they loved this shit, it's all they did. Fuck schoolwork, their stick-thin asses were always here, clogging the place up, legions of them.

The rich kid swore again, forcing me to look back. The phone was off his ear and he was busy putting five game-cards back on the shelf.

Ha, looks like mummy got on the line and caned him.

Couldn't help but smirk as he left the shopp, the little shit trying and failing to slam the door on the way out. Then coming back and trying it again, managing a little clicking noise. Then calling the corridor a slut and flicking on the shopp window as he trailed off out the centre.

Never mind, he'd be back, tomorrow or the day after...or the next time he didn't do badly enough to fail an exam. Little wretch had no choice. Ever since Katsuda-San and his *communal vision*, they couldn't go anywhere else, not if they wanted to buy.

Your Money To Your Community To You, as the posters promised.

A weird message, almost pure anarcho-communist until they added the *To You* at the end. Ryu claimed it was the big companies shooting themselves in the foot – short term profit for them, an introduction to communal ideology for the rest of us – but then he also worked for one of those big companies, so what did that mean?

One of the lights above flickered, twice.

Telekinetic warning from Ryu? *Don't call me a sellout*, riding down the Osaka to Tokyo ley line?

In truth, I suspected he was happy to pick up his post-Katsuda salary, and the political stuff was just so he could look at himself in the mirror and not cry like an AV girl.

But I never told him that.

Besides, he deserved a decent wage. People like him used to get 180k yen a month, 210k if they worked weekends. Almost nothing. The guys at the Chiba docks got more than that and all they had to do was press *stop* and *go*.

'Fresh off the truck, *teme*...first copy.'

I blinked myself back to reality and turned to the counter. Ah, fucking finally. Yosh was out from the store room, stepping over bunches of tied-up wiring with a game-card loose in his left hand.

'You got it?' I asked, voice almost cracking.

'This morning, according to the tag. Must've come in when Tek was here.'

I didn't know who Tek was and didn't care. *Pluto 2280* was right there, within claws' reach. Yosh shifted the fiberglass roll left and put the game-card down on the counter, mumbling something about *cartoon space colonization*, and how it wouldn't be out officially for another two months minimum.

'That's what I heard,' I replied, lost in the game-card art; an over-the-ship-shoulder shot of Pluto, the Graphene-12 tether to Charon visible in the distance.

'Not sure how we got it so early...review version maybe.'

'Doesn't matter.'

'Right. Exactly. So all we need now is something coming in from your side. A lot of somethings.'

I picked up the game-card, squinting at the shade of red used for Pluto, and told Yosh my brother would send something soon.

'Yeah, when would that be?'

'Don't know. Soon.'

'Soon...'

'Yeah.'

Now that I saw it close up, the cover art didn't look so great. The red hue of Pluto was a bit too bright, the astronauts were stock anime, the ship's design mass looked bizarrely out of proportion.

But it was just the cover sketch, it wasn't...

'Been over three months now.'

...the actual game.

'That long?'

Yosh nodded.

'Nah, three or four weeks maybe, not three months.'

He straightened up behind the counter, eyes an inch above mine, arms longer, more defined. At some point during the last minute, he'd scooped up one of the wiring bundles off the floor and was now picking at it with his stabbing hand.

'Something going on over there?'

'Nothing.'

'Not losing his grip, is he?'

'Grip? Course not, he's an original, one of the longevity monks.' Yosh didn't slouch, so I added a little more. 'Serious, he's been there ten years nearly, they wouldn't push him out. They can't.'

'You're too sure of it, *teme*.'

'Like, even theoretically...it's impossible. He's done too much for them.'

'Yeah, way too sure. This other guy I knew, rooted in Osaka twelve years, mid-level, not some intern or mailroom boy...and they kicked him. No bad decisions, no admin errors, didn't piss anyone off, and they still kicked him. Thanks for your twelve years of loyal service, but things are getting stale, *teme*...gonna get one of those zygote grads in on a starting salary.' He gripped a loose bit of wire and pulled, snapping it. 'Serious, that's what they do if they think you're used up. No appeals, no severance, nothing. Didn't even give the guy to the end of the week, just kicked him straight out, same day chop.'

I nodded half-heartedly while flipping the game-card over and frowning at the screen-shots.

'You listening, *teme*?'

'Yeah...'

'Okay. What did I say?'

'Huh?'

'Just now...details.'

'Your friend got kicked out, no severance...I heard you. But that won't happen to Ryu, it can't, he helped promote the communal thing, that whole concept. They wouldn't...they can't do that to him.'

Yosh finally gave up on the wiring, chucking it on the floor and tapping the edge of the counter instead.

'The games, Keni.'

'I know, *teme*, they're coming. Ryu's gonna take care of it soon.'

One of the kids on the VR dentist chairs woke up from his Odin sleep and started yelling, 'it was that fuck, the zombie cop. He was-...fuck off, clown jumped me. Accident. Didn't find shit.'

Surprisingly, Yosh let it go. Not even a fatherly *shhh*. Confused, I looked up from the game-card and flinched when I saw his eyes were still on me.

'Okay, relax. I'll call him later, when I get home. See if he can send something next week.'

Yosh didn't say anything, just kept staring.

I switched back to the game-card, reading the first sentence of the synopsis five times, then glanced up again to see if he was still doing his muted Stasi impression.

He was.

But worse than Stasi, more repressed, caged-feral...the same look he'd had when that drunk walked in and knocked over the *Jezebel Blue* promo. At two in the afternoon.

'Tomorrow,' he said, voice as detached as a tarot card vlogger.

'Huh?'

'I need at least one new game-card here by tomorrow.'

'Serious?'

He nodded.

'Yosh, come on...'

'Delivery, six hours tops. Eight if there's traffic. Phone him. Tell him *tomorrow*.'

'You want me to call him?'

'That's right, *teme*. The sooner, the better.'

'But he's-...'

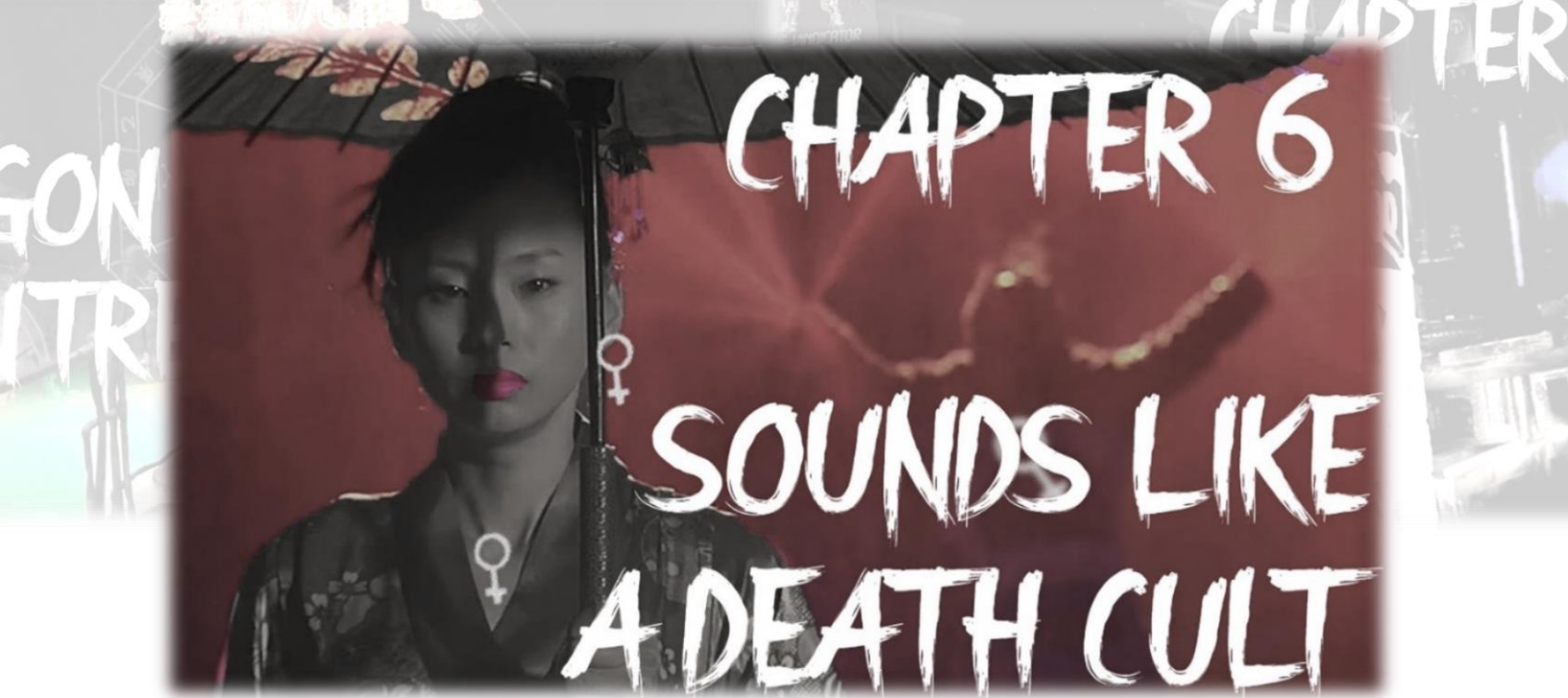
'Six hours. Express delivery.'

I looked at Yosh's arms, the shirt sleeve crawling up and the black swirl crawling out. I knew what that meant. I'd seen guys on the news with the same mark, black bags over their heads, being shoved into a police van.

'Okay, I'll call him when I get home. See if he can. But I doubt he's gonna have the-...'

'Determination, *teme*. Convince him.'

Another shout from the dentist chair: 'There, dead...you're gone, *abazure*.
Bye bye, off the screen, go on, fuck off.'



The sky was streaked with green slashes [*safe pollution*, the media called it] as I got back on the train and out of Jiyugaoka.

Just like before, all the seats were taken by a mix of school kids, mums with prams and geriatrics staring off into space, so I stood by one of the poles in the middle, thinking, semi-scrambling.

Yosh was right. It had been over three months, almost four. Never usually took this long to send out new games. Even during the bosses' strike last year. *Kuso*, Ryu, what *were* you doing over there?

A baby cried out from one of the prams, getting a quick, 'there, there,' from its mum before she looped back to her phone.

Wah, forget Ryu, what was I doing? I knew Yosh, knew him when I'd started this mess, where he was from, who he was with, the shit he'd probably done in Ikebukuro.

But, Yosh...he liked me, didn't he? At least a little, and enough not to...not to what? What would he do exactly?

The train stopped and more people got on.

A man in a *Silent Crimson 8* vest, guitar case on his back, moved in front of me and filled up most of my space.

Fuck, no apologies, no gestures.

'Hey...' I said, firm but not aggressive.

He shifted his feet, turning further away. The guitar case pushed against my chest, forcing me back a little. What the-...was he drunk?

I steadied myself against the bar behind and examined the intruder. Two, three inches shorter, weak shoulders, skinny arms...

Running off a lunatic hit of adrenaline, I moved forward, pushed the guitar case to the side and off his shoulder. The guy turned, annoyed, confused, his mouth already open to call me something...then closed fast when he saw how close I was.

No words back on my side, just a black hole glare.

Tsukubashi's potentialism.

Kristeva's abject.

Must've been in his head too as he looked at my arms then shook his head, heaved the guitar case back onto his shoulders and turned round.

I balled my right hand up, addressed the back of his neck. 'Don't take my space, *abazure*.'

No answer.

'You hearing? Don't take my fucking space.'

He pretended to look at the train map above the door while a couple of suit guys stared at me from their seats - as did the baby in the pram - but fuck them, they wouldn't do a thing.

The tannoy woman came on and told us the next station was approaching.

Guitar guy was gonna get off, I knew it. There was no way he could last another station, not with me breathing down his neck.

Ondōan versus house plant.

Bataille versus actual sacrifice.

Gamer versus...

I watched the guy's face through the reflection in the window, wondering if he was scared. It was hard to tell, his expression was almost completely blank. I wanted him to look a little like Yosh, but no matter how hard I stared, the topology wouldn't change.

Kuso.

Next stop came, doors slid open.

He hesitated a bit, pretended to double-check the map, then got off. Stopped on the platform and, when the doors had closed, turned to glare his own black hole right at me.

I met it head on, muttering, 'get back in here then, *abazure*.'

Obviously, he didn't.

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The train went through five more stations before my hands relaxed and my brain started to think about where I should be going next.

At Musashi Kosugi, I got off and sat down for a minute. The citric yellow mosaics they'd put up to entertain people during the economic sinkhole ten years ago distracted for about a second, until my *accursed other* forced a swirl of blood over the top of them.

The games.

Focus.

I took out my phone and called Ryu. It rang one time then went straight to the *dit dit dit* theme. Fuck, still afternoon, he was probably busy. Call after seven, he'd be free by then.

But what if he wasn't? I mean, tomorrow...was Yosh serious?

Another rush of people got off the train and went past, half of them patched in to re-runs, the rest mentally spare.

Forget Yosh, forget him. He wasn't serious, he liked me, I was sure of it. And the games would come, nothing would happen. Think of something else.

Why was the alien in Alien black?

Why does it kill Yaphet-

No, not that.

Something else.

There was Kawasaki, six stations away. I knew people there I could-...

Kuso, Nozo...he worked nights, he'd be back home now, sleeping or...no, he'd be up still, playing games. He wouldn't mind hanging out for a while. Assuming I could remember where his apartment was.

I stood up and started moving towards the Nambu line.

But...hang on, the game?

Shouldn't I...

I pulled it out of my pocket and looked at the cover again.

It looked beautiful, Pluto the Infinitely Far, even if it was cartoonishly red in places.

My mind ploughed ahead, trying to picture how it might play.

Assuming the game was built on the same features in *Pluto 2270*, which the designers had promised in at least twelve interviews, there would be the five district city base, the outer ring labs, survey missions, possibly some trips to other dwarf planets in the Kuiper Belt, like Eris or Makemake. What else? Continuing intrigue from the Inner system, one or two adventurist space yachts docking at the Neptune chandelier hotels...that stuff didn't matter so much as it was mostly background...no mercenary attacks on Pluto or anything dumb like that. So, it'd probably start off the same as the last one: wake up in your room and get used to your character, feel out the new add-ons, the general environment. It was a ten year gap in-game, so it shouldn't be too different. There was a slight chance they'd start *in medias res*, as was the trend now, but nothing too silly. A survey mission perhaps, heading out onto the nitrogen ice, stubborn rock, or over to the theorized tholin patch that hopefully wouldn't be the same shade of red as the cover pic.

They wouldn't, would they?

No, no way, the designers were notorious for being pedants when it came to science realism. The company probably just hired a poor cover artist with kindergarten-level research skills. It wouldn't carry over into the actual game. Would it?

Feeling anxious, I turned to the back and read the description.

'Continue the Conquest of Pluto before it actually happens, using the same predicted tools and facing the same predicted obstacles.'

The word *conquest* didn't feel right, wasn't *colonise* like the first game, but the rest was okay.

And the screenshots were realistic enough.

No weird-looking keyboard aliens like that *Black Hole Zero* debacle last year.

No idiotic space battles or laser fights.

Thank Gods.

I pulled out my phone and saw a new message. It was Ryu, at last.

'Busy. Call back tomorrow.'

Kuso, tomorrow. Not good.

My finger hovered over the *call* icon.

Should I just tell him the truth, let him know who we're dealing with? Then after he's finished screaming at me, he could send the game. Or maybe he'd refuse? Sometimes he was ruthless that way. Like with his friend who got caught up in the alien telepathy scam. Would he do that to me, too? His own brother?

Don't risk it, said my Sengoku rice merchant voice. Just call tomorrow, ask him to send at least one game. Yosh won't give that much of a fuck, one day, three days, he doesn't really care. We're not friends exactly, but he likes me enough to do that. I think. Well, he's never swung for me...

Yeah, we're okay, he'll wait.

I looked over the screenshots one more time then put the game back in my bag and waited for the next train.

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As usual the Computerr Research Lab at Keio U was both open and fully booked. Skinny, little shits pretending to do their assignments on one side, and about four times as many skinny, lazy, little shits pretending their assignments didn't exist in the Relaxation Zone.

Normally, I would've given the place a wide berth, but it was closer and more reliable than my server at the dorm, and something in my head was saying, play it, play it, play it, and I couldn't ignore that cos it was right, I did need to play it.

Pluto 2280.

In my very own paws. Before anyone else had a chance to play it. Why even feign resistance?

I spoke to the assistant, who was also a student [I'd seen him in a few of my rare lecture appearances], and he gave me a form to fill in. 'There'll be one free within the hour,' he said, not even looking up.

'On the research side?'

He sighed, the first person I'd seen do that for a long time. 'Is that what you're here to do?'

I pointed at the form, where I'd just finished writing *Collectives in The Spanish Civil War*.

'Not sure we have that in the library.'

'You do. I've used it before.'

'Ah. Okay then.' He checked the computerr again, nodding. 'Fifty-five minutes.'

'What?'

'It's near the end of term. Both sides are busy.'

'Okay, give me the ticket.'

'You can find the research card yourself and bring it here. If you don't have your own patch with you, we can lend you one. Remember, no outside software, no food, no drinks.'

'Yeah, I've heard the spiel.'

He handed me the ticket with a weakly concealed look of irritation and went back to whatever it was he did in this place. The truth was, as long as you got a card from the library as a decoy, you could install and play your own and he couldn't do a thing about it. Unless you were dumb enough to make give-the-game-away noises...

But did he really care that much anyway?

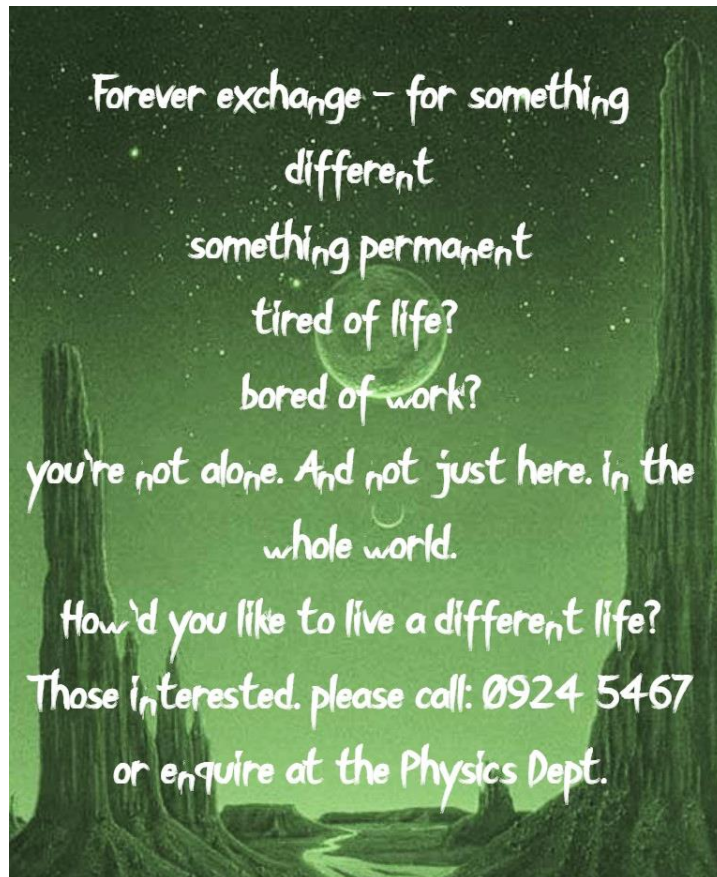
It was guaranteed that at least half the students using the research side were playing their own game-cards, and he couldn't check all of them, so why not just kick back and let it happen?

That's what I would do if I were him.

Seeing a lack of pretty women in the waiting area, I went outside into the corridor and looked at the posters to kill time. Most of them were crap, stuff about music recitals, nothing about Space or games or filmn auditions...

'All business, no soul,' I mumbled, not really satisfied with my own line.

One of the posters did stand out a little, primarily because it was a sci-fi green planet and looked like it had been made by infants.



There was only one pinned up so I took it.

Got bored and looked at my phone.

Wah, still forty minutes to go.

Folding up the poster, I walked down the corridor and out a door at the end and into the car park. The Student Union was a few buildings along so I made my way there, thinking briefly about going over to the Physics building, but then counter-thinking that the poster was a mess and what the hell did any of it mean anyway?

Forever exchange? Of what? Whole thing sounded like a death cult, like they had some machine in there and they were gonna point it at volunteers, the depressed who'd seen the poster and nodded their heads at the *tired of life* question and run over and said, 'yes, yes, really tired of it,' to the blank fuck in the white coat behind the desk, and then onwards, drugged and fastened, into the neurology room or-...

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Outside the Student Union there were more of them.

Green, red, pink, purple, they weren't taking any chances.

I sat down on one of the sofa chairs and re-read the poster.

What the hell was it?

Not Just Here, In The Whole World

An international exchange? They were bringing them here and sending you there, to Sweden or Ghana or wherever, and then what?

And why was it permanent?

What kind of college would permanently exile its own students?

I shook my head and looked around the other seats for someone interesting.

There were two girls sitting not too far away, one with dyed red hair, the other plain and not worth describing.

Ryu popped into my head, reeling off a list of female anarchists who were also plain-looking, and it was visceral enough to make me amend my description to *plain with a pile of books next to her and a FETCH HELP t-shirt that looked okay.*

Happy now, brother?

The red-haired girl saw me looking and glanced over once, but not a second time.

Not interested? Devious?

I stared at her, determined. Stared for almost ten minutes before she got up and walked off, leaving her plain friend behind. As further penance to my imaginary

Ryu, I got up and said, 'nice t-shirt,' as I passed by, before gunning after her red-haired friend. Luckily, she wasn't the fastest walker ever, and I quickly caught up to her outside by the steps.

The sky was getting dimmer now, and she was a little jumpy at the ambush, but when I explained that I'd seen her in some of my lectures, her arms dropped back to the sides.

'Really? Have we met?'

'Technically, no, but I think I responded to one of your questions in a seminar...last month. If that was you?'

'Maybe, I'm not sure. You're doing Political Science?'

'Yeah, exactly,' I lied, almost whistling. 'Political Science.'

She smiled. 'What was my question?'

'Sorry?'

'My question in the seminar.'

'Oh right. Yeah. The question was...it was something about...*teme*, it's gone. I can't remember. But it was a good one.'

She looked away towards wherever it was she was going before I'd stopped her. The train station probably. No one studying here actually lived in the area. In fact, there was a chance that she was also in one of the Tsunashima dorms.

'You walking to the station?' I asked, pointing down the road.

'Yeah...'

'You wanna walk double?'

'Huh?'

'Walk together, me and you. We can talk about some political *ism* words. Nihilism, fatalism, Kou Shibasaki-ism...'

She smirked and repeated, 'Kou Shibasaki-ism.'

'So? We're already walking...slowly, but still...'

Hang on, the Computerr Lab. Pluto 2280...

'No, it's okay, I don't mind walking...'

The game, the game...

'...double for a while. Actually, I'm kinda curious about this Kou Shibasaki philosophy you-...'

'Wait, *kusō*, I've-...there's somewhere I've gotta be.' I looked back at the uniiversity building. 'I'm really sorry. But...I don't know, maybe I can get your number or something?'

'My number?'

'Yeah. If you get lonely walking to the station sometime...you can call me.'

She put her hand in her pocket, kept it there.

'You did say you wanted to know about Kou Shibasaki-ism.'

She laughed. 'Right.'

I stared at her pocket, acting it up.

'That's just one of them, too. Next time I'll tell you about the true meaning of Ryu Murakami's hair...why it is, how it is, what it wants, how it feels.'

She laughed a little more, said I had, 'really weird lines,' then told me her number.

I typed it onto my phone, asked her name and then put that in too, adding *red girl fuck* on the end of it to remind me who she was.

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The sky turned from dim to *edge of the solar system* dusk.

Or vampiric purple as Ryu called it.

I walked back across the car park, past the Union entrance, past the English Department and the sub-library and some other department that taught something business-related I didn't know about.

Kou Shibasaki-ism...Ryu Murakami's hair...where did that come from?

A movie? TV serial?

I couldn't remember any.

Maybe there was a part of my brain that scanned further...past pop culture and into the past...no, not the past, up there, into Space...maybe it was the Ondōans

giving me the weirdness, feeding it into me through some kind of invisible telepathic thingy.

Maybe Hide was right, they were controlling everything?

But...

Why would they make me say shit about Ryu Murakami? How did they even know who he was?

Kuso. Wherever it came from, it worked.

I half-smiled [not enough to make me look loopy] and kept walking, thinking ahead to my meet-up with the red girl, and as soon as I pictured her hair on my pillow, the image changed, morphing into that beautiful, tholin-sprinkled surface of Pluto.



When I got back to the Computerr Research Lab, my number was up, so I waved the *Pluto 2280* game-card – the non-labelled side - at the admin guy and walked deeper in. Straight away there was a problem: some kid was sitting in front of my screen, playing one of those *classic* half-bit, non-VR games. I checked the ticket. Nope, it was definitely mine. What the fuck was this little trog doing?

'Done,' I barked, waving the ticket above his head.

No response.

'Time's up. Finished.'

Nothing, no head movement, barely even blinked.

On the screen, there was a beach and a man running up some steps onto a promenade. Behind him, someone yelling, off-screen, then gun-shots. So loud I could hear them through the guy's headphones. Which I decided to yank off.

'I said, time's up, *kasu*. It's my turn.'

He looked up, dazed. 'Five seconds.'

'*Kuso...*'

I spent the five seconds looking at his build. He was sitting down, but I could tell he was small. Arms stick thin...chest covered in an over-sized *Critters 6* t-shirt...no real weight behind anything.

'Five seconds gone, *kasu*. Get off.'

He shook his head and kept playing.

It was probably wrong to start a fight in the computerr lab, but he was pushing me, his arms were skinny, his pinched face was annoying...it would be over pretty quick.

'You deaf? I just told you to get off.'

My hand pushed his bony little paw off the keyboard. He tried to slide it back, but I blocked, cuffing him on the temple as an exclamation mark.

'It's not saved, *abuzere*.'

'Don't care. Move.'

I picked up the legs of his chair and turned it over. Clearly unprepared for that degree of escalation, he shrieked and skidded off onto the carpet, hitting his head on another guy's bag.

'Get up then, *kasu*,' I told him, hands already fists. 'Fucking try it.'

Across the room the assistant guy I kinda knew saw what was happening and strolled over, sipping from a flask as he went. Seemingly unsurprised at the guy sprawled on the floor, he told me in an odd monotone that this kind of thing was against the rules and it could end in a permanent ban from computerr lab resources. I told him back that the guy wouldn't move, and how he'd said *five seconds* to me like a little contrarian, but the assistant didn't care. 'If it happens again...permanent ban,' he repeated, and then told the other guy to stop moping, his time was up.

The little wretch picked up his bag, called me a *motherfucker* in American-English then walked off, smacking the door release button on his way out.

Unmoved, faintly bored, I picked up the chair and took out the game.

The assistant was still hovering.

'Is that research?' he asked.

'Spanish Civil War. From the library.'

'Right. I forgot...'

He didn't go away, so I kept my hand over the game art.

'Sorry about that.' He pointed at the door the stropgy guy had just walked out of. 'To tell the truth, this isn't the first time. We've told him before, follow the

time limits, but it's pointless. He just says *five seconds* on repeat until one of us comes over and forces him off.'

'Permanent ban?' I said to the screen.

'Yeah, we tried, but, you know, he's got money. Or his family has. Anyway, whatever he does, you can't start trouble. He always wins that way.'

'I'll let you handle him next time.'

'Yeah, thanks. Can't wait. Actually, I don't really know why he comes here. He's probably got all the hardware back at his house. And he doesn't even play VR half the time. Like just now, he was playing one of those old games. Which is fine, but...why would you come *here* to do that?'

I smiled and held up the blank side of my game-card. 'Sorry, it's due tomorrow morning.'

'Oh, right. Of course. Sorry for holding you up.'

'No worries.'

'Do you have your own patch or...'

'In my bag.'

'...do you need-...right, okay.'

He hovered a few seconds longer, looking down at the carpet then said an unfinished, 'good luck with the...' and walked back to his desk over on the other side of the room.

I waited until his eyes were elsewhere then put in the card. Thanks to my well-funded uni, the installation only took eight minutes, and then another minute to connect to my patch. There were no alarms, no suspicious looks, so in I went.

+++

'Descent to the surface commencing.'

Computerr voice, generic female.

'Engine intact, no damage detected. Hull exterior also intact. Landing in ten seconds. Nine. Eight. Seven...'

Kuso, *in media res*...the rumours were accurate.

I stared out the window at the surface.

Looked icy enough.

That part should've been accurate at least.

Had some red tholin haze in the distance too.

The ship shuddered.

'Three, two...'

Landing jets fired, landing plugs lowered. The ship touched, rose back up a bit then settled softly on the surface.

Too fast.

I blinked and there was movement around me.

Out of pack instinct, I moved with it.

The ramp was being lowered and twelve men in space-suits were walking out. I was one of them. Half of me was tempted to stay on the ship and lounge around, make a coffee or something, but there was a strong sense of mission in the air and the punishment for not keeping up could've been confinement. Ah, I'll just walk out, see what they do. The others are faceless at the moment, but I know they're all NPCs so it doesn't matter.

Abrupt static, chased by a gruff voice.

'Secure the area, 1km square. Move out.'

'Yes, Sir.'

The others moved out and headed off in different directions away from the shuttle. I stayed behind and stretched my limbs. The group leader was still lurking nearby so I pretended to check the landing plugs.

Argh.

Was this optional?

Couldn't I just go back to the base? Or even better, one of the barrs on Pluto-Cha?

I retreated towards the shuttle ramp, but a hand reached out and reeled me back. 'Better take this,' the gruff voice said.

He handed me what looked like a laser rifle from *Black Hole Zero* and I didn't bother trying to hide my confusion.

'Shoot on sight, soldier.'

'what?'

'Show those Martokras whose system this is.'

I went through about a dozen responses in my head, but ended up nodding. He's an NPC, no point quizzing him.

After an awkward few seconds, he moved away.

I looked down at the shape of my rifle and let out a labored breath. This wasn't what this game was supposed to be. Shooting alien encroachers? war maneuvers?

Maybe I did something wrong when it was loading. Chose the wrong option without realizing. Or it's a lure for the brainless players, starting *in medias res* to suck them in then switching back to base life and space realism.

Whatever it was, this soldier shit was done.

I double-checked the stat visuals on the other characters, confirmed that there were no PCs and then skipped forward an hour.

+

The scene altered itself slightly, adding a blue campfire and several large rocks for the other characters to sit on. I was standing near the shuttle, and when I moved over to join the others, some random gas sputtered up out of the ice. Was that supposed to be sublimation? Jesus, it looked cheap.

When I got to a vacant rock and sat down, my brain almost short-circuited. For some reason, I had completely missed the fact that no one else was wearing a helmet. On Pluto. Reaching up to my own head, I discovered that I wasn't wearing one either.

What the Oort Cloud fu...

'Quite an amazing invention, isn't it?' said the man with a gruff voice, shaking a clunky-looking device with flashing yellow dots at the rest of us. 'All the oxygen we need for the camp zone, all regulated by this wonder machine. Incredible.'

One of the NPCs raised her hand and recited designated lines. 'I don't get it, Sir. How can it make air when there's no seal around us?'

The other NPCs murmured in agreement.

I would've done too, if I weren't still in shock.

'You see, those markers we put down are not just markers. They're oxygen generators. And this,' he shook the device again, 'this is a transmitter. So, this transmits, and the markers receive. You see, they are receivers.'

The transmitter transmits?? Was this real?

'I see. So the markers pump out air then?'

'Indeed they do. Lots of air.'

Ten of them got it. The appointed skeptic of the group didn't, shaking her head.

'But Sir, about the seal?'

'What's that, soldier?'

'I mean, we have all this air, but there's still no seal? How can the markers contain the oxygen in this area if there's no seal?'

'Soldier, that's an interesting question.'

The Sir didn't expand. Just stretched out his arms and told us all to get some rest as it would be a long, perilous day tomorrow.

As they all disappeared inside their tents, the *skeptic* who had questioned the *Sir* stayed behind and questioned him again. I lurked nearby.

'You still don't get it?'

'No, sir. I tried, but I don't.'

The Sir put a hand on the skeptic's shoulder.

'There is an answer, don't worry. It's just too technical for grunts like us to understand. Best off leaving it to the science coats back on Earth. Clear?'

The skeptic repeated *clear* and disappeared into her tent. The zip went up behind her, but stopped two-thirds of the way, giving myself and whoever else was around a sneaky shot of her de-suiting.

What...

Who made this? A fourteen year old boy?

I watched a little longer, picking a spare oxygen pod nearby as cover in case she noticed the voyeur. She got down to a vest top before I felt guilty enough to look away. In a *Harem Survival* game, fine, but in the *Pluto 22* series, like this? My eyes went left, my brain trailing slowly behind. I saw another tent with its zip halfway down, and the Sir standing inside with his shirt off and his pants about to drop.

Kuso...

I watched a bit more, curious to see if he'd really pull them down. Lower parts were usually off limits in this kind of game, though with the popularity of Harem VR, maybe that had changed.

It had.

The pants came down and the Sir stood there like a French actor, stretching his neck muscles. I turned back to the skeptic's tent and saw her sliding into her sleep suit. *Kuso*, she'd just been full frontal too.

Was I supposed to go into one of these tents?

In *Pluto 2270*, crossing that kind of boundary without consent would've had consequences. Even real time in the confinement cell. But none of the NPCs had ever stripped in front of me before.

A jet of sublimating ice shot up next to my foot.

Wah, I almost forgot.

This was Pluto, not Earth.

Pluto 2280.

where astronauts stripped down to bare skin in minus two hundred and thirty degrees Celsius.

where they walked around without helmets and said shit like, 'leave it to the science coats.'

Yosh...what the hell was this?

This couldn't be the real game.

Real immersion experience. Exact words on the cover. And exactly what the last game was like. You've given me the brainless version. Mixed up *Pluto 2280* with some *Black Hole Zero* or sex onsen rip off.

Fuck, Yosh, this is my whole day ruined. would've been better to get nothing than this shit.

My right index finger moved over to the left palm, about to press down and end this mess when a blue laser beam shot out of the sky and burned a hole through one of the tents.

Oh no...

The sir character ran out of the tent shirtless, but not pant-less, and ordered everyone to take cover behind the shuttle. 'It's the Martokras, they've located us.'

I stood where I was, half praying for one of the lasers to hit me.

Did I really want to continue with this?

It was still Pluto.

This could just be the intro.

Maybe the Martokras were letting off steam?

One attack and then terse co-existence.

It was possible.

Another laser shot past my head, hitting one of the other NPCs, practically melting their whole arm off.

'That's your research?'

'Wah...!'

'Doesn't look like the Spanish Civil War.'

The assistant was perched behind me, on the nitrogen ice of Pluto, looking at the art on the packaging that, like an idiot, I'd left face-up on top of my bag. I pressed down on my left palm and looked at it too. It was still a bit hazy, but I knew there was nothing even remotely Spanish or revolutionary about it.

'Err...actually...'

'And your facial reactions picked up on the lab scanner do not match those of research.'

'The game art isn't reflective of-... ' I looked around, seeing parts of the computerr lab merging with Pluto as the game closed out. 'Hang on, you have facial scanners in here?'

'I told you the rules.'

'Where? On the ceiling?'

'No playing games in this part of the computerr lab.'

'Okay, look. Slow down a sec. I'm still a bit goggy...groggy...here. Just let me finish the...!' My eyes were still half in the game, still receiving the nonsense plot. Now the *Sir* character was constructing a rail gun, with metal scrap from a nearby pile. The camera zoomed out and revealed a second pile. And a third. The other NPCs were already picking pieces up and making barricades.

'What the hell are they-...!'

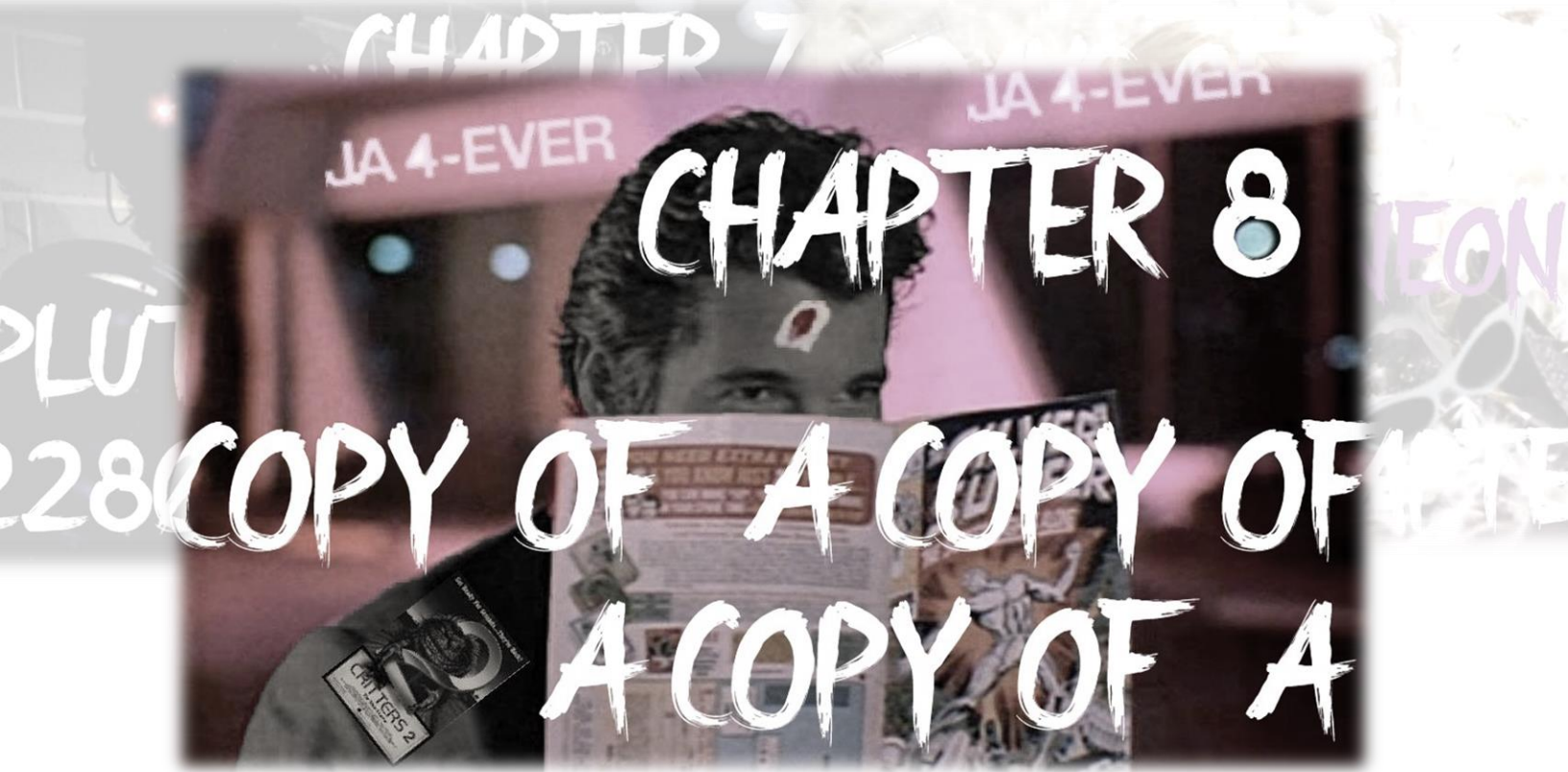
'If that's what you want, then you'll have to get a ticket for that side and wait like everyone else.'

'All that metal...'

'If not, you'll have to leave.'

'...from where?'

The surface of Pluto faded out, with the computerr lab reasserting itself unapologetically in its place.



'Where the hell did all that metal come from?' I asked, not really caring if anyone else on Tsunashima bridge heard or flinched or flailed.

The cover came out of my bag again, mock innocent.

'Metal land? Pluto scrap yard?'

No answer.

'Fucking *kasu*...'

We were walking home-wards, myself and that disgrace of a game. The assistant had kicked us out, ignoring my one plea for leniency and then the following seven threats to have him subpoenaed [I meant fired].

'What then? Permanent ban?'

'This is a first offence so, no, not permanent. Just take a rest for a few days then you can come back.'

'A few days? Three? Two?'

'I think a week would be better. And when you do come back, no game, please. And no more aggression. Okay?'

I'd told him I would come back whenever the will took me, which meant there was no point going back at all. It's not like there was any work due. Or there probably was, but that was way out of my orbit.

A couple walked past on the bike lane side, fondling each other and, when they got about ten metres ahead, it finally clicked in my brain that the girl was Tomomi.

Wah, my Tomomi. The third most chilled-out player on *Moon Factory 7*. The girl I sometimes hung out with at *Clamo Sha Sea Food*. Did she know how dumb this new Pluto game was?

I turned onto another road, walked past the new karaoke building and then Saizeriya. The addict part of me, a smallish part, thought about going inside and patching in, swallowing their dumb 4900 yen deal, but then I remembered the caveat: only games in the Saizeriya catalogue can be used. Okay, then I'd go in and scrawl out some napkin messages, notes for the designers of this game, telling them every single thing that was wrong with the fucking thing. Number one: it lies.

I didn't go in though, there was no time.

The game had to be played.

Given another chance.

Maybe skip ahead to the base part of the narrative and see if any of the others had got hold of it yet. Somehow. Not that I wanted to talk to half of them, but it was better than brainless NPCs. At least we could slow the pace down a little, collaborate.

I looked down at the game-card, attempting forgiveness.

Gah, all that metal though. And the harem shit. Walking around shirtless on Pluto. No helmets. Why?

The game shrugged and, if it had a voice, probably would've told me there was an answer, but it was too technical to understand.

Yeah, leave it to the science coats.

Those guys.

+++

Re-entering the dorm in ninja form was my plan, but that failed instantly as the lights were on when I opened the door, and three of my roommates were camped in the common room.

The mute and Asami on the couch, Hide on the floor, some cyberpunk thing playing on *Hey Muon* and half-crushed cans of Tiger underneath the table. Wasn't a hundred per cent sure, but I assumed Hiroki was already in bed, asleep. Exhausted from all his pointless vacuuming.

We all traded a token *hey*, with Asami asking if I was gonna sit down.

I gave a curt *no*, but she persevered and forced an excuse out of me. 'I've got work due in tomorrow,' I tried, to which she laughed and said I never went in to get any assignments so how could I have any due in, and, even if there were things to finish, did I really care?

'You do, why can't I?'

'I care, of course, that's why I wake up in the morning. Hey, don't disappear into your VR Cave, sit down, chat a while. You can take the floor with Hide.'

'Put me on the floor, huh?'

'Yes, join me,' Hide said tapping the carpet. 'We're the big cats. Her big cats, jaguars. Raaaaaarrr.'

Ignoring the weirdness, I sat down and asked them why they were drinking.

'Holiday,' the mute answered.

Kuso. What was his name again? Kenji?

'Early end of the week,' Asami added, pointing at one of the uncrushed cans under the table. 'Take one if you want.'

It was too dark to see if the ring-pulls were off, but I managed to find one, and casually opened it up. Croatian brand, I guessed, taking a sip and then seeing by the label that I was completely wrong.

'You manage to beat four today?' Hide asked, pushing his feet out until they were almost touching my leg.

'What?'

'Your hibernation schedule, cat man.'

His feet touched my thigh and he laughed.

I didn't.

'You mean did I wake up before four?'

'Hey... ' said the mute.

'What?' I shot back.

He jabbed towards the screen.

'He's trying to focus,' Asami whispered, 'it's the second to last episode.'

I shifted back and saw a small, cherubic guy with a knife, running, screaming at a taller, Bangladeshi guy with a shaved head and muscle crops growing out of his shoulders. He didn't make it. The shoulders guy vanished and re-appeared behind the knife hero, smacking him across the factory floor.

'*Planet Dark*,' I said, remembering a brighter version of the same scene from my childhood. 'Didn't know *Hey Muon* had this one.'

'New addition.'

'That's weird. It's pretty old...doesn't hold up that well either...not like *Rabbit Hole*...or *Void Galaxia*...or *Alien* even.'

'Too loud,' the mute said again.

I shrugged and drank my beer. The Bangladeshi shoulders guy talked down at the knife hero on the floor, and was about to kill him when the knife hero pressed a button on his watch and beamed himself out of there. The episode ran on and ended back with the Bangladeshi shoulders guy, on a Santiago rooftop, looking at the metal implants in his forearms pulsing giallo purple, saying, 'brand new Phalanstère'. I vaguely remembered the next episode and how it would end, and thought about telling the mute...but decided to drink more beer instead. He was unpredictable, the mute. And not the smallest guy in the world. In fact, if he didn't slouch all the time, he'd probably be taller than me.

'So the Indian guy's radioactive now?' Hide asked the room.

'Purple flavour...' I replied, pushing his feet away.

'I don't get it.' Asami reached down, taking another beer...then quickly returning it and grabbing a non-empty one. 'If he's got that power then why doesn't he get sick? Like, radiation poisoning or something?'

The mute shrugged, got up off the couch, picked up two empty cans from the table, dumped them in the bin then disappeared.

There is an answer, I thought, but it's too technical.

The three of us stuck around a little longer, chatting over the frozen intro of the next episode. They weren't so bad, a bit generic, but they tried. Not bad, for economics students. And Asami wasn't bad looking.

Just as I was finishing my second can we started talking about recent serials and how they couldn't make a dent cos of VR and adventurist realism. That was my argument anyway, vaguely stolen from a vlog I'd seen on Itō and skim-hauntology. Asami countered, saying it was changing back and would be different in another five years, and then Hide scratched his leg and said it would never change back, *Planet Dark* was the pinnacle and that was nearly twenty years ago.

'What about that new serial?'

'Eh, which one?'

'The yellow muon thing,' Asami said, pressing fingers into her throat suddenly [to contain a burp?] 'The blob that absorbs the guy and flies him off to an alien base.'

'Remake,' I replied, sharper than intended.

'No...is it?'

'He's right, original came out ages ago.'

'*Kuso...*'

'Like, ten years ago maybe.'

'I didn't know that.'

'Probably underplayed it, that aspect, trying to make you think it's a new thing. That's pretty much what they do now. No original stories cos they might lose cash. Everything's a copy of a copy of something that was done decades ago.'

'Wah, so optimistic.'

'That's why he has so many friends.' Hide held up his hands as soon as he said it, adding, 'joke, don't hit me.'

I finished my beer and picked up the game, *Pluto 2280*, looking at the words typed out boldly on the cover: *Real Immersion*.

'New game-card?' asked Hide, glancing up to tag in Asami, who already had a grin on her face.

'*Harem Survival 5* probably.'

'Or that Queen Himiko thing...'

'Pagan Love Slave?'

'All nudity based on recently unearthed skeletons.'

'Wah...'

'Born at the wrong time,' I finally managed to reply, getting a drunken nod in response, and then confusion from both of them. 'All of us. Me, you guys...everyone. That's the reality of it.'

'Huh?'

I picked up my empty cans, like the mute, dumped them in the bin, like the mute, and was going to leave like the mute too, without saying a word, but the comparison irked me so I stayed put, lingering by Asami's arm of the couch.

'Or the wrong time in history,' I continued, nipping some of her beer. 'The wrong time period. It's-...we're in an endless period of nothingness. No big thing will happen in the next fifty years, guaranteed.'

'On *Hey Muon* or...?' Asami said, her face puzzled.

'Anything. Serials, VR, music, space exploration. We're in a captured society and there's nothing we can do about it.'

'Wouldn't go that far,' said Hide, stretching his legs out as if this discussion were going to carry on all night.

'Yeah, creativity-wise, there's good stuff out there...'

'Inconsequential stuff.'

'...*Jenny Jaunt, Portal to Another Portal, Dogged Dragon*...'

'*Alone In The Kuiper Belt And That's Okay*...' added Hide, stuttering a bit at the end.

I shook my head, dramatically, almost spilling some of Asami's can.

'All with the same structure, same distribution method...gives you a quick hit, maybe, and then nothing. That's the essence of capturing. Same thing over and over with all the parts rearranged...pro-capital, anti-capital, mock-revolutionary,

doesn't matter, it's meaningless.' More of Asami's beer, more shots of *Pluto Harem* 2280. 'Sorry if that's depressing, but it's true. Long as the adventurists control the networks, we're stuck.'

'Adventurists? You mean capitalists?'

'Same thing, yes.'

'They're behind *Jenny Jaunt*?'

'All of them. Every single serial and game and filmn.'

'I thought it was independent.'

'Nominally, yeah. But if you follow the funding...nope. Not even close. Tentacles fucking everywhere.'

'Wah, you almost sound like a college student,' said Asami, reaching over and patting me on the arm.

'Almost, but not quite. I'm going to bed.'

'Already?'

'Before I make us all suicidal. Good night.'

'Actually, if we're talking about the new version of *Jenny Jaunt*, it's meant to be quite...!' Hide started, but I was already gone.



My dorm VR server was dead.

Or it may as well have been. Four hours to install a fucking game?

Was this real?

Didn't it know I was already pissed off?

Muttering, 'fucking Martokras,' under my breath, I switched to my game-card version of *Moon Factory 7* and patched in. It functioned okay, no frazzled weirdness...until the background scenery starting flashing green and the NPCs walked on air like it was the fucking floor-grid.

Okay, that definitely needed to be fixed. Another game?

I scrolled through my cards – *Harem Survival 4*, *Quarter-Life*, *Pluto 2270 etc.* – and struggled to put colour to any of them. Too familiar. Played to death and beyond.

Kuso. What else?

Dorm version of *Moon Factory 7*? Tomomi or Sachiko would probably be on, I could do some crater watching with them. But the lag would be pretty bad...half-filled in background, NPC buffering freeze...unless I detached the install?

I checked the timer on *Pluto 2280*. Three hours and fifty-eight minutes left.

Kuso. Four hours.

Everyone knew dorm servers weren't the fastest, but new games never took that long to install. One hour max.

Fuck.

I looked at my phone and saw it was already eleven.

What was I gonna do for four hours?

Forums?

Vlogs?

Sleep?

Opening a new tab, I went to *100 More* and scrolled down the main page.

Apart from a video about what it would feel like to fall into the atmosphere of Jupiter, there was nothing of interest.

Ah, didn't wanna look at my phone anyway.

That's what addicts did.

I reached over and switched to *Pluto 2280*. The installation clock came back up, continuing from where it had left off. Three hours and fifty-four minutes.

Okay, no phone, no internet.

What else?

+++

Things to do [without a computerr]:

Stare out the window.

Read manga.

Read Ryu's anarchism book.

Stare at the posters on the wall, dream of space travel.

Wank over Asami/Tomomi.

Go out, walk around...

Shovel coins into the lap of that homeless guy

+++

I sat by the window, staring at the side-street below, that albatross book on anarchism half open on the bed next to me.

There was nothing happening outside so I picked up the book again. Flicked to one of the middle chapters, a part of the book I'd never reached before. Jeff Fahey, what have you got for me tonight?

+

'The key component of any true anarchist state is a lack of state.'

It was the only line I could read before the words got complicated. Which was a bit weird as the first three chapters seemed more accessible, but this...

'As soon as you create an ideal, you create adherents, and with adherents comes orthodoxy, and at that point the ideal becomes finite, to which the inevitable outcome is destruction; not necessarily *the* end, but *an* end. To quote Spinoza, 'belief and comprehension of an idea occur at the same moment,' so once the ideal is comprehended it can only be negated, and the final negation is, inexorably, destruction.'

What was Fahey playing at? A thousand hundred long words suddenly. *Kuso*. Didn't you say this was an easy read, Ryu?

Maybe the translator added them in to give the subject more heft?

Maybe Jeff Fahey only wrote in basics, too many basics, and the translator decided themselves that that was bullshit, the subject needed to be obtuse.

Actually, how did translation work? Was it just copying or did it... was there some kind of art to the thing?

Why would they give these people prizes if it's just copying?

I put the book down for the thirteenth time and stared out the window. There was a guy I half-recognised down there now, and a girl on the wall opposite – no patches in sight – and he was trying to pull her down onto his lap.

I watched, hoping for sex, thinking of Asami

+++

Five minutes later, the guy had his hands up her shirt.

I didn't bother to hide myself. Just stared robotically, watching two drunk students I didn't know attempt to have public sex. But it was too slow. Too

performative. I tried to replace the two of them with myself and Asami, and the wall with a bathtub, but that wouldn't stick either.

Asami...Asami...she was probably in her room by now. Why didn't I just...

+++

Ten minutes later, the guy had a hand up her skirt.

She punched him in the chest, but it wasn't real anger, cos she was laughing too. Most girls in high school played that game. Aya did it to me right before we fucked in the forest near Nikko.

Asami would probably do it too, if I ever got close enough. She seemed like that kind of person.

Asami...Asami...

Closing my eyes, I tried to picture the two of us together. It wouldn't stick. I got my phone and found the photo of her in a loose top, and tried again.

Nothing.

Kuso.

Fuck.

I switched back to anarchism, trying to think through everything I'd read over the last few weeks and turn it into...something.

What was there?

Details, Keni-cat.

I grabbed a pen and notepad off the desk and started scribbling:

A map of the system...solutions.

Hierarchy leads to inequality. Inequality leads to workers pissing in bottles and cringe sitcoms for the middle class.

Solution: get rid of hierarchy.

Set up collectives interlinked along horizontal power lines.

Ryu's idea, not mine. Or Fabey's. Or Bakunin's. Other Russians ending in IN.

Problem: we're wired into this current system, indoctrinated. Difficult to think differently. People are convinced anarchism means we're going to take away their homes and sex dolls.

Bigger problem: sexy adventurist propaganda. Saori Takamoto's tits. Jerry Shimada's abs. In Collectives, we'd all have to wear dungarees and attempt roof farming. Reduced nationalism leads to nihilism, not love? Some people want to live in a country of two hundred million plus and pretend they're integral to it. All the best castles were built by rich guys. Actors, directors and entrepreneurs deserve much, much more than everyone else. Tom Hanks is a nice granddad. So is Ken Watanabe. Kou Shibasaki is still single and she won't fuck you if you take all her money away.

Existing solutions: direct democracy, recycled + determinable tax, other things I don't completely understand.

Japan problems: Many.

Working Class Estates: they look like shit. Dominated by the colour grey during daylight hours, and bright neon to encourage gambling at night. On overcast days, neon can start as early as 11am.

Idea: failing a Spanish-style revolution, we crowd-source and build a housing estate for the working class, with good facilities and low rent.

Yes, an anarchist housing estate, I thought, re-surfacing. I could do it, with enough cash from other people. Asami could be my aide. We could stay in the same building, receiving gratitude every day, fucking at night with a clear conscience and a happy mind.

That could work.

I looked at the cover of the book.

Did Jeff Fahey write about this too?

In ridiculously long words, probably.

Kuso.

My eyelids were starting to drop from politics overload, so I gave up on the scribbling and turned to the window again.

The two drunk students were gone.

I looked at the clock.

Eleven forty-five.

Still early.

Still three hours and twelve minutes left on the installation.

The door outside my room opened and then closed.

Asami.

I stood up, walked to the wall next to my door and listened.

She was walking up and down the hallway, talking to someone...on the
phone?

Asami...Asami...

No.

She liked me, I knew it, but...what if she didn't?

No, forget it.

I stretched my arms.

Eleven fifty.

Not even midnight.

Still enough time to...do what?

...

Anarchism.

Anarchism.

Anarchism.

No, too much theory.

It was giving me a fucking headache.

Goldman migraine.

Bak attack.

I looked at the pile of coins on my desk.

Ah, voluntarism.

That sounded better.

Assuming it meant what I thought it did.

Direct charity?

+++

Twenty seven minutes later, give or take, I was in the ghost park, the same place I'd seen the homeless scientist guy the night before.

Only this time he wasn't there.

No-one was.

Just half-broken swings and residual neon from the conveni opposite.

I sat down in the exact same place, a little Tupperware container full of coins in my pocket, and waited.

In my head: Pluto. Yosh. Anarchism. Ryu lecturing me on the phone about lounging around like a koala instead of doing something productive.

'Have you read that book I gave you?'

'No.'

'You should look at it.'

'I read the first page. It's boring.'

'No...'

'It is.'

'Why?'

'It just is.'

'Were the words too hard?'

'No, not really.'

'Was it the ideas?'

'No.'

'Then...what?'

'I don't know. It's just boring. Anarchism...politics...all of it.'

'Jesus, Keni...'

I picked up a leaf and wiped some of it on the ground, trying to get the dirt off.

Okay, maybe Ryu wasn't 100% wrong.

It wasn't boring, it was just dense.

And some of the words were hard.

Besides...that kind of book, wasn't it bad to just let someone lecture ideas into you? Wasn't it better to read a few lines then start thinking out your own way?

I put the leaf on the ground and decided it was.

Much better.

Who was this Jeff Fahey to tell me what to do anyway?

What had he ever done to fix things?

+++

An hour later and the homeless guy still wasn't there.

I stood up and stretched.

He probably changed sleeping places every night.

I'd probably never see him again.

Fucker can't even stay still and let me help him.

My hand became a fist.

For some reason I was angry.

I looked for something to punch, but there was nothing detestable close by.

Nothing cloying. Vacant.

Kuso...

Time to head back then.

Punch the VR machine.

+++

Back at the dorm, the common room was empty.

No Asami.

No Hide.

No beer cans or *Hey Muon* menu screen to prove they'd ever been there.

Were they figments of my imagination?

The longest ever lasting case of immersion haze?

Maybe.

Navigating through the corridor without the lights, I stopped outside Asami's room and briefly thought about knocking. But all I could think of to say to her was, 'hi, are you a figment of my immersion haze?'

Not a good line.

I continued on into my own room and almost laughed when I saw the numbers left on the installation timer.

Two hours and thirty-eight minutes.

Basically a death crawl.

+++

Despite giving up on the game for the night and dragging the duvet over my head, I still couldn't sleep.

Pluto.

NPCs without helmets.

Full frontal strip-shows.

Aliens with lasers.

Black Alien.

They were in my head and wouldn't leave. I turned on my side and tried to think of the actual surface of Pluto, with no tents and no astronauts and no Martokras, but it wasn't working.

The Sir was stroking his neck outside the tent. Holding a giant metal beam, telling everyone it was time to construct a teleporter.

I was in the shuttle, with the skeptic, both of us wrapped up in winter jackets.

'Teleporter, now.'

'We don't know the science.'

'Follow the instruction manual.'

'It's too theoretical.'

'One hour then we'll give it a test run. Move.'

The other astronauts did as they were told, as did some of the black aliens from *Alien*, and soon enough there was a huge metal egg-timer with pulsing blue lights propped up against the side of the shuttle.

Luckily, the skeptic was feeling mutinous and took my hand, leading me off to the shuttle cockpit. We settled in and launched without touching any buttons.

'You want vegetarian or chicken?'

'Don't know.'

'Or pesto pasta?'

'We're here.'

She pointed out the window to the university campus below. Almost instantly, I felt sick.

'The lecture starts in two minutes.'

'I can't.'

'If we jump, we can get good seats.'

Before I could say no again, one of the black aliens appeared behind me, saying co-operation was dull, and, brother, your chest is so tempting right now.

The skeptic pulled a rail gun out of nowhere and told me to move.

'I can't.'

'We're gonna miss the lecture.'

'Don't shoot.'

'Get outta the way.'

My body didn't move an inch.

Using its tail, the alien scooped up the skeptic and hung her upside down in the air. After promising to attend the lecture on her behalf, it plunged its second mouth into her chest, biting little pieces of lung, breast and heart each time it went in.

I stood there, a coward.

A pocket of turbulence rocked the shuttle.

The alien and the skeptic tumbled out of the cockpit

A flash of purple.

Then white.

I opened my eyes and saw a shadowy figure hovering outside the window, its neon purple eyes the only part discernable.

What...

Did we just...

The eyes pulsed at varying levels of brightness, like emergency hospital lights.

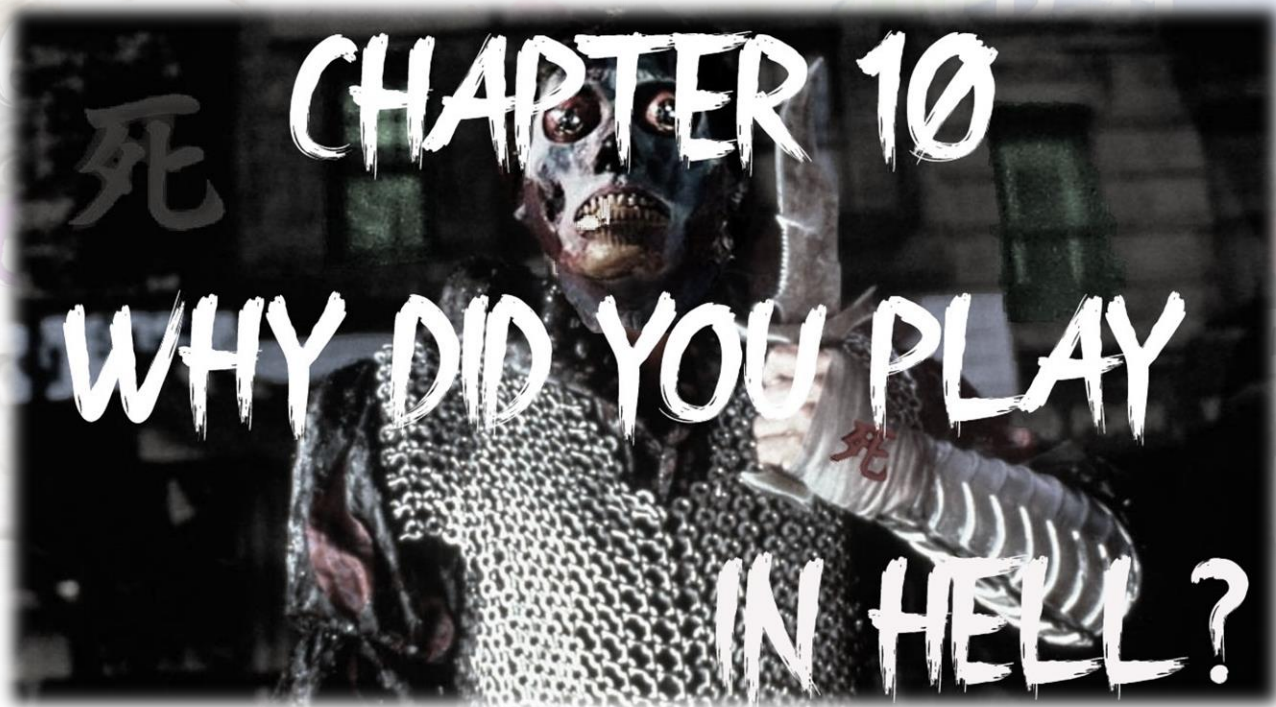
My body stayed rigid, paralysed.

Was this real?

I waited for my own eyes to adapt and fill in the rest of the shadow-figure's shape and, when they finally did, the purple vanished in an instant. As did the shadow-figure.

The logical move was to get up and examine the street below, but my legs were still out of action, so I lay there, eyes fixed on the smeared glass opposite, wondering if what I'd just seen was tangibly, physically real.

And what I would do if it returned.



Surprising even my own subconscious or Other-Scape or whatever the philosophical term was, I woke up at nine the next morning dozed a bit imagined forest sex with Asami, an army of purple eyeballs watching from the canopy, a spiraling vortex to cartoon Pluto then finally rolled off the bed around eleven.

My head was still fuzzy from getting a patchy amount of sleep, but I remembered very clearly the thing hovering outside the window. And the paralysis that came with it. Hoping it was just a variation on immersion haze, I went online and searched *shadow creature with purple eyes that floats outside windows*. No results except 18+ fan fiction. Okay, immersion haze then. Good.

The VR server made a beeping noise, winning my attention.

Right, time to play that ridiculous-...

I blinked several times before the message on the screen sank in.

Installation Failed. Try Again?

Again?

And stare out the window for another four hours?

Kasu...

I reached over and removed the game.

What I *had* to do was go back to Yosh and see if this really was *Pluto 2280*. My gut said he'd given me a knock-off by mistake, an ambush fake from a smaller developer maybe, and if I showed him some of it, his gut would say it too.

He might even feel guilty about hassling me so hard for the games yesterday.

As if it was my fault Ryu decided to be so fucking lax all of a sudden.

I picked up my phone and checked the messages.

Kuso, still lax.

Not even a *forgiveness emoji*.

Ah well, I'd give him a call at lunch, see what was going on. As long as he got something over here within the next week or so, Yosh would be okay. Maybe a few mumbles, a fucking *kasu*, but nothing too extreme.

+++

Arriving disheveled and zoned out around half twelve, I did a comedy double-take at the Dragon Centre sign when I realized zero hawkers were spilling out, coming at me with VR flyers or XXXX-Rated *Harem* try-outs. Nope, definitely the Dragon Centre. And deathly quiet.

Everyone's inside seemed like the best explanation...until I went in and saw that the corridor running parallel to Yosh's place was exactly the same. Almost no life there at all. Just an old guy talking to a robot insurance poster. Shirtless. With one flip-flop stuck on his left hand.

The lights weren't that comforting either, every second one switched off or broken, and the others set to a kind of buzzing haze effect.

Maybe they've just opened, I thought, pulling on the door to the shopp. It would make sense.

The *Harem Survival 4* poster on the wall opposite didn't have a response.

Nor did the empty game chairs.

Or the ghost counter with all the fiberglass bundles.

For half a second I thought maybe I'd crossed into a Yosh-less alternate dimension, but then I heard some noises on the other side of the room and caught him at the old video-game screens. Apparently, he was teaching a school-kid how to play one of the classics. It was a bit weird for anyone to be in that section of the shop, but it did happen sometimes, usually after a semi-popular vlogger did a retro-game playthrough.

Of course, they could just play it online at home instead of coming in here and eating into my time with Yosh, but that would be too-...actually, why did they come in here? Wasn't it school hours?

'Keep your finger on this button and it reloads faster...'

'Which button?'

'Top left. Here.'

'That's a button?'

'Obviously.'

'Thought it was part of the design.'

'Just hold it, okay?'

'Yeah, yeah...'

I waited for Yosh to either finish the instruction or slap the little shit, but he didn't, he just kept going on the level. As a formal announcement, I tapped on a nearby shelf with the *Pluto 2280* game-card. He didn't hear me, so I walked over behind him, looked at the screen, and said, 'wah, what's this shit?' when I couldn't recognize the game.

'Quiet, I'm showing the kid.'

'It's this Pluto game, *teme*. I need to change it.'

'Five seconds.'

Audibly sucking in air, he performed a ridiculous seven button combination on the control pad and then let it back out as the character on screen blew up a helicopter.

'Okay, you got it?'

'Maybe.'

'You get bored, come over and I'll patch you into *Hunters Of Mars*.'

Yosh patted the teen on the shoulder then turned to me with Kitano face and gestured towards the counter. A few steps gone, he turned back and told the kid to be careful, there'd be two tanks coming at him from the street on the right in a couple of seconds.

'You still play that stuff?' I asked, surprised at his memory-recall.

'In a previous life.'

He continued on, giving me a wink as he went past and, after shifting the fiberglass bundles off the counter, leaned forward and asked what the problem was.

'The Pluto game, it's faulty.'

'Huh? Thing's brand new, *kasu*. What you talking about?'

'Okay, maybe not faulty, but there's something not right. It doesn't match with what it says on the cover.'

'Show me.'

I gave him the game-card and he read the synopsis on the back.

'So it's a world-builder...'

'That's not the problem. It also says *real immersion*, but...just play it, you'll see.'

He took out the game and inserted it into the hardware under the counter. Unlike my shitty dorm room machine, the game seemed to install itself instantly as he was already putting on the patch. He asked for more specifics on what the problem was, but I couldn't really explain anything, so I told him to just play it and he'd know.

'Is it actually faulty?'

'Not exactly.'

'Cos if it is, you could just go to big bro and get a new one.'

I looked at his patch, seeing that both lights were green. Wah, he was in and still talking to me like the game wasn't on at all.

'Couldn't you?' he prompted.

'This one isn't made by his company.'

'Yeah? What is made by his company?'

'Huh?'

The teen across the store shrieked at the screen and started hitting the buttons much harder, probably trying to deal with those two tanks.

'You promised me a game today, *teme*.'

'Yeah, it's coming.'

'Is it? Because yesterday you said today, remember?'

'I know, I know.'

'You better fucking know.'

I looked at his patch again, ignoring the thin layer of sweat forming on my palms. 'It'll be here soon. I promise. Are you on the surface yet?'

'Uh-huh.'

'What's happening?'

'Some guys are taking their helmets off. Something about setting up camp.'

'Exactly, that's it. That's the start of it, the helmets coming off. It's not right.'

'Seems okay to me.'

'No, no, it's not right. It's brainless. *Pluto 2270* didn't do this...'

'So?'

'...didn't even get close to doing it. No, Yosh, you don't understand. Play a bit more, the tent stripping scene...the aliens attacking the camp. It's like a fucking cartoon. Complete opposite of the original. Serious. There's no way the designers would put out something like this.'

'What, you're angry cos it's different from the first one?'

'Not different...stupid. Like a fucking Harem game.'

'You mean popular?'

The teen in the classics corner shouted at the screen again, so loud that Yosh took out the patch, walked over there and slapped him on the back of the head.

'Shoot and move, *kasu*. It's fucking obvious.'

'You didn't tell me that.'

'Here, give me the controls.'

Wiping palms on my jacket, I swiped the patch off the counter and attached it to my temple. Maybe I'd been too quick to judge. If I got past the alien attack, things could return to something resembling the original.

I patched in and went straight for the time settings.

Five hours should do it.

The shirtless grunt-astronauts and tents evaporated on the surface, soon replaced by a half-broken shuttle and mutilated bodies.

I was on my back, inside the shuttle landing bay, with a bare arm draped over my chest.

Swallowing down bile, I turned and saw the skeptic lying naked next to me, tits moon-like. There was a gaping wound on her neck but, apart from that, she seemed to be doing okay.

'That passed some time,' she said, stroking my chest hair.

I tilted left and counted out the bodies just beyond the landing ramp. Ten humans, most in pieces, plus several tentacles and pea-green heads that had to be the remains of the invading Martokras.

'You wanna go again?' the skeptic asked, moving her hand down my stomach.

'The whole team's dead.'

'Yeah, poor bastards. Best not to think about it.'

'The bodies are right there...'

'Evac will be here soon. Let's focus on that.'

'...and we're lying here.'

'Or other things.' Her hand moved farther down. 'You want me to go on top? Block your view of the dead?'

'This cannot be real...'

My phone rang.

Pushing away the skeptic, I pressed my right index finger onto the left palm, hard, then picked up.

'Keni Kat,' said a familiar voice.

'Ryu...'

My head immediately scanned the surrounding environment. Yosh was still over with the kid, so I could talk a little, but he couldn't know who it was. He'd hijack it if he knew. Then I'd be in real shit.

'You in lectures now?'

'Just left one,' I lied.

'Free to talk then?'

'About the games you're not sending, yeah. Very free.'

'Right. That. Listen, Keni...there's something I need to say. Something important. Fairly important. Don't interrupt, okay?'

'For how long?'

'No questions either.'

'Can you just quickly give me a game update first?'

'I'm serious, Keni, just listen...'

'Okay, okay. I'm shutting up. What is it?'

Ryu coughed twice then started his spiel. He talked about the house back in Fukuoka, the Hawks, old boyfriends, the way the industry was going. Basically covered everything except what he really wanted to talk about for a minute or two and, as promised, I listened without saying anything.

Finally, he got to the point. 'They let me go, Keni.'

Across the room, Yosh had stopped giving the kid instructions on how to kill the zombie tank commander and was looking my way.

'*Kuso*, let go!'

'Permanent, no coming back.'

'Serious? I mean, completely let go?'

'That's what they said. Or typed.'

'But...was it the games you were sending? Did they find out?'

'That? No, no...everyone does it, at least to some degree. In fact, they like that part, it's good for their image. Pretending to help local communities. Typical corporation think.'

'Then...what was it?'

'Expense cutting. Entropy. I don't know.'

'They didn't give you any clues?'

'Not their style.'

'But...*kusso*...you've been there ten years. I don't get it. Is it-...'

'Doesn't matter, it's done now. I just wanted to let you know.'

There was silence...kind of...if you ignored the Osaka traffic and random human screams in the background.

'You know what, forget it, Keni. I'll be fine. It's just a job. You go to class, learn something.'

'But...'

'I'll call again later.'

'Ryu...'

The line went dead.

'Ryu?'

+++

I tried to dial back, but there was no answer.

Nothing.

The tone was ringing, he just wasn't picking up.

Kusso, the last guy who got kicked out...it was on the news, poor fuck got the e-mail and went straight to the roof.

Ryu wouldn't do that though.

Would he?

My brain turned monochrome, panicked, quickly re-saturated.

I thought of the top of Ryu's building and how long it would take for me to get to Osaka, race up there and talk him out of it.

No, he wouldn't. Said he'd call me back later. It was okay. He wouldn't. Wasn't his style at all.

A line came into my head, something Ryu always used to say when he was at unii.

The mask convinces only through will...cos we want ours to convince too.

Nah, that wasn't right. He never wore a mask...not with me.

Not to that extent.

And what about the games? Didn't he have any?

I dialed again and wiped more sweat off my hands. This was not the place to be having this kind of drama, not with Yosh lurking nearby.

Kuso, Yosh, he was coming over. Had he overheard?

Probably not...but better to play dumb just in case.

I put the phone down and patched back into cartoon Pluto.

The skeptic was putting her knickers back on, telling me that no one had ever made her feel that way before. Before I could even guess what it was I'd done, a shuttle flew overhead and started firing blue lasers at us.

'Fuck, they think we're the enemy,' she shouted, grabbing a rail gun off the wall.

'What...?' I muttered, trying to process it all.

'Who was that?' asked Yosh from somewhere behind me.

I pushed a finger into my left palm and followed him as he moved back round the counter, jumping a bit when I saw another, rounder man leaning against the wall, breathing like he'd just lifted a flight of stairs. What the-...where did he come from?

'Who was that?' Yosh repeated, taking something from his pocket and handing it to the other man.

'Huh?'

'On the phone...who was it?'

'No one. Just a friend of mine.'

I glanced at the other man again and immediately wished I hadn't. Eyes fixed like a bored-looking predator back on me, breath still ragged, tanned neck with a tattoo that I recognized from the *Know Your Gang* vlog I sometimes watched. Not the same type as Yosh's, more senior. And the rubbish bags he'd just dropped on the floor, the weird stains of red and blue.

'Sure it wasn't your brother?' Yosh persisted, pulling the patch I'd dropped back across the counter.

'Who?'

'Your brother, *kasu*. It was him, wasn't it?'

'No, I told you, it was a friend. Some guy I know in Kawasaki.'

'You're lying.'

'I'm not. His name's Nozo.'

'Nozo...'

'Call him if you want, ask him.'

The tattoo man muttered something, one of the words definitely *face*. Yosh didn't respond, and, thank fuck, didn't ask for my phone either. He just stared down at the underside of the counter, trying to pull loose stubble off his chin.

'This is getting tired...'

'What, me?' I asked, pointing at my own chest in mock surprise.

Another bout of muttering from the tattoo guy, this time with a fleck of spit flying out. Yosh held a hand up, seemingly lowering the heat.

'Tell me what's happening with my games, Keni.'

'The Ryu games? Nothing, they're coming...'

'When?'

'Tomorrow. I told you before, remember?'

'Tomorrow?'

'In the post today, arrive tomorrow. No problem.' I took the *Pluto 2280* game-card out of the server and placed it carefully on the counter, just so I'd have something else to look at. 'Probably gonna leave this one here, if it's okay?'

Yosh stretched his hands out over the counter, tightening his triceps. The black swirl tattoo emerged from the sleeve, longer than I thought it was...than the vlog had said.

'Probably a fake version anyway.' I glanced over towards the door, relieved to see the lights were now brighter in the corridor, and there were people walking past. 'Sorry, *teme*, I have to go...afternoon classes will be starting soon.'

The tattoo man grunted and Yosh gave a, 'yeah, I know,' back to him.

'I'll come in when the game arrives. Okay?'

'Wait...'

'Definitely sometime tomorrow.' I turned, pretending to look at something to the left of the exit. 'Afternoon probably.'

'He said wait, *kasu*,' slurred the tattoo man, wiping some red stuff off his hand.

The path to the door was clear. Neither of them moved to block my way. Yet I stayed there like an obedient dog, one hand still glued to the game-card resting on the counter.

'Good boy.'

Yosh picked up a pad and pen from the side of the counter and started writing what I could see was a list. After a couple of minutes, he tore off the paper and handed it to me.

'This is what you owe.'

The list: *Space Jumpers, Pluto 2270, Pluto 2280, Age of Lunar, Space Duck Hunt, Little Fight 1 and 2, CS46, Age of Galactic Empires 1 and 2 and 3.*

'Off the top of my head,' he added as I continued to read through.

The list [cont.]: *Moon Circuit, Moon Factory 6 +7, Time Splitters, Time Jumpers, Portal Red, Portal Blue, Quarter-Life, Re-Rise of the Empire, Star Runner, Grandia 1 and 2 and 3, Tao Zero 1 and 2, Orphans of the Sky, Orphans of the Stars, Orphans of the Orphans...*

'Wah...!' I stumbled, other words dying in my throat.

'Total's at the bottom, including interest.' He pointed to the tip of the paper, at a number beyond me. 'A pretty fair price.'

For some reason, I pictured the little money silos on my desk back home. Ten stacks, two yen, fifty yen coins... *kasu*, it was nothing. Old currency for the market or homeless guys. My Astora account, even worse. There's no way I could pay even a quarter of this. 'This is crazy...'

'After your debt is cleared, we can start again from zero.'

'But...our deal...'

'...has been skewed for a long time. You got five, we got one. Now we don't get any.'

'No, that's not-...Ryu, he's sending new games, I told you.'

Yosh ran his finger along the edge of the counter. 'I haven't seen shit in three and a half months. There are no more fucking games.'

'No, there are, new ones. Really, he's just been a bit lax and-...'

'This is not a discussion, *kasu*.'

'Tomorrow. He's sending one. A good one, I promise.'

'You can settle your debt in two installments. First one today, second tomorrow. Or you can pay all in one go.'

I stared at the total. Gawped at it. *Kuso*. I didn't even have enough to pay for one game. Not even that piece of shit *Star Runners*.

'Huh...you mean now?'

'Cash or card.'

'But...I don't have any cash.'

'Card then,' said the tattoo man, clearly deciding that I was a *flee* type and stepping over the rubbish bags with possible body parts to block me off.

'That's not-...it's at home. I don't have it on me.'

'No cash, no card.'

'I mean, I have cash...just not enough for this. Not on me, right now.'

The tattoo man let out a stream of something that didn't even sound like words – *EERRUUUGGG* perhaps – then put one finger to the side of his neck and tapped.

'Here?' asked Yosh, tone weary more than surprised.

There was no answer, just continued tapping.

Checking the door for curious faces, Yosh put his hand under the counter and came back up with a knife, one of those the delivery guys used for cutting open boxes. He put it down flat on the counter and covered the blade with his hand.

'Yosh,' I stammered, too frozen to even think about edging away from the counter.

'First installment.'

'One day. Give me one day.'

'For what?'

'The game. I swear to god, it's really on its way.'

'Yeah, on the back of a fucking snail.'

'It'll be here tomorrow, I promise.'

Yosh looked to the side and consulted with the tattoo man, who was basically flanking me now. They assessed the chances of me paying, not with disguised looks, but in direct speech, as if I weren't standing right there listening to it. Finally, the tattoo man conceded that maybe I was a safe bet as Yosh knew which unii I went to, and which company my brother worked for.

'Game tomorrow, *teme*,' said Yosh, including me in the conversation again. 'Plus twenty per cent of that total. If not, then you're giving us full payment for debt owed.'

'Okay, got it. Definitely tomorrow.'

'No running.'

'Course not. I would never-...I mean, I don't have anywhere to run to. And I have the money anyway so I don't-...there's no need for that...even the idea of trying...'

'Tomorrow, *kasu*.'

'...to do something-...yes, tomorrow.'

'Before one.'

I nodded, giving myself a second to stabilize my voice. 'Right. Tomorrow before one. I'll be here.'

Yosh did a nod of his own, his hand flipping up the knife and stabbing the point back down into one of the fiberglass bundles. 'No fake games either, *teme*.'

'I won't.'

'Don't make us follow up, *kasu*,' added the tattoo man, not budging a millimetre as I moved to go past him.

'No, no, I won't.'

Turning side on and edging forward with my back awkwardly chafing against the shelf, I made it halfway to the exit before Yosh called me back. In his

right hand was the piece of paper, that list of blatant extortion I couldn't utter a single word about.

'In case the game doesn't come,' he said, blank-faced.

'Thanks.' I came back and took the list, doing my monk-level best to ignore the knife in Yosh's other hand. 'Tomorrow, for sure. Before one.'



At Jiyugaoka station, I stood in a daze, possibly on the platform, possibly on the tracks, surrounded by lunch-time bustle, trying to think of all possible routes to money [plus not having my fingers chopped off].

There was Ryu...

But he wasn't picking up. And he'd just been fired anyway. Would probably need everything he had just to take care of himself.

Asami?

No, too humiliating.

Mum?

Pointless. She'd say *no* before I even managed *hello*. And she didn't have much anyway, not since Dad died.

Nozo?

Last time I saw him, he was in debt worse than I was.

My Astora account?

Three thousand, two hundred yen.

Next student loan installment?

Half a month away.

The coins on my desk?

Ha. If I wanted to buy a lollipop...

Kuso. Think Keni, you wretch. Think.

Who else?

Who else did I know that didn't hate me?

+

Yosh walked onto the platform and waited two carriage lines down from the college kid.

The word 'kasu' was still seeping out of his mouth, towards his boss and the idiot with the game debt, but he was careful to keep it muffled.

It was pointless though. The kid wasn't stupid, he wouldn't run.

And why did it have to be him on follow duty?

Masa didn't know anything about running the VR Centre, yet there he was, trying to run a fucking VR Centre. Just cos he couldn't be trusted not to get mad and stab the kid outright..

Great. Punished again for being the calm one.

+

On the train I stared at a line of eye mask ads, fragments of them, trying to block out the conjured-up murder scenes inside and focus on where exactly I should go.

Osaka?

I phoned Ryu again, the vague idea of hopping on the shinkansen a sudden speck in my head, but he still wasn't picking up.

Home?

No, no, no, no...

Pluto 2280?

After I've had my throat cut, sure.

A nearby phone made a beeping noise as loud as a pachinko bot, sending me back to the eye mask ad, the reality of it, and, from there, my current problem.

Okay, no cash, no lenders. How about selling something?

A fairly detailed sketch of my bedroom appeared in my head, with all the things I could strip down and take over to the second-hand shopp. It was a short list. The only real thing of value was the VR server, and that was unii property. The

games...maybe. But most of them were over two years old, they wouldn't be worth much. If the guy took them at all. And even if he did, even if I got a decent price, it wouldn't make a dent in all that ludicrous fucking interest Yosh had stacked on.

Kuso. What else?

The window? Could I sell that?

+

On the train, Yosh stood with both arms on the top rails like a monkey. He'd stopped the internal whining on gang politics and was now observing the kid, trying to predict what he was thinking.

Probably scrambling for money lenders. Or shit to sell second hand. That's what I'd be doing.

Ah, wait, he's phoning someone.

Osaka?

+

The train stopped at Musashi Kosugi and I thought about getting off, catching the Nambu line and visiting Ako and Yasu in Kawasaki, see if they had any savings I could drain to save my ass.

It was a long shot. Last time I'd seen them we'd argued about how many *Akira* adaptations there had been. Not sure if they'd forgiven me for that yet.

+

The train stopped at Musashi Kosugi and Yosh pictured a scene from a movie. He had forgotten the name of it, but the scene had a little American guy with a funny accent being chased by three other guys on a train. In the climax, the American had waited for the train doors to close before jumping off.

That wouldn't happen on this train though.

Kid was so deep in thought he didn't even know Yosh was there.

+

The train doors closed and I realised I'd just told Yosh I was going to class, and if he found out I was going anywhere else then he'd know I was a liar. And besides, Ako, Yasu...they played in the Katcha Centre all day, they wouldn't have that kind of money. No-one I knew would. Except Ryu maybe.

Kuso. What the hell could I do here?

+

The train doors closed, and the kid stayed on board.

Yosh forgot about the movie.

+

I got off at Hiyoshi and walked the ginkgo tree road to Keio U.

+

Yosh got off at Hiyoshi and followed the kid down a 'Heal The World' road to the uniiversity.

+

The cars outside the Student Union were covered in those posters. *The Forever Exchange.* Each one seemingly a different colour, but all of them insanely bright. The whole scene looked like a kindergarten snowstorm had hit and no-one could be bothered to clean it up.

+

The cars were covered with bright, weird-looking posters. Yosh picked one off a windscreen and read about something called a 'Forever Exchange.'

'Tired of Life.'

'Looking for Something Different.'

'Call the Physics Dept.'

He threw it back on the ground, muttered, 'fucking academics.'

+

Inside, it was just as bad.

+

Inside, it was even worse.

+

I figured out where my building was and picked a route to take me there, but, at the first corner, the posters appeared in Giallo red, lured me in closer to skim the text and, after reading through seven times, I looked at the poster again, the colour of it, and thought, red like the Ondōan wormhole swirls, could it be a sign?

Tired of Life. Something Different.

Had I not always wanted something like this?

+

The kid stopped and started a lot, and then stopped a little longer to read one of those shit-design neon posters.

Yosh played with the knife inside his jacket pocket.

Was this a trick?

Some special kind of torture?

+

I walked into the Physics Department and told them, without hesitation, that I was tired of life and interested in something different. Obviously accustomed to this kind of abruptness, the woman behind the desk nodded and asked me to take a seat.

There was one other person in there, a girl with a green hood pulled tight over her head, so I sat down next to her and asked if she was waiting for the same thing.

No answer.

Peeking round the side of the hood, I realized she was asleep.

+

Yosh saw the kid disappear into one of the rooms. He walked past and glanced through the glass and saw him sitting next to a hooded girl, waiting for something.

The plaque on the door said 'ROOM 207.'

The notice board nearby said Physics Department.

Okay.

Science shit.

Moving on to the end of the corridor, Yosh sat down on one of the steps and lit up. There was a poster of the eleven planets on the wall opposite so he looked at that.

Waiting season.

In a student-filled Hell.

Don't be too long, kid.

+

What You Might Call An Interview

+

After roughly twenty minutes of counting the eyebrow hairs on the hooded girl, I was shown into an [oddly] darkened room with a high chipboard desk, a projection wall and four, pale blue lights hooked up on a tilted-to-one-side ceiling rig.

I hovered for a few seconds, getting my bearings.

There were three people sitting behind the desk, their backs to the projection wall.

A man who looked like a property agent, middle-aged, glasses.

A woman who looked like a less friendly version of Fujii Mina, middle-aged, glasses.

A man who looked South-East Asian, middle-aged, no glasses.

They asked me to take the chair set out Securitate-style in the middle of the room, where the four lights were focused, and the first question asked was almost accusatory: 'what exactly are you doing here, young man?'

It took a few seconds for my eyes to adjust and, when they did, I concentrated on the shape in the middle, the one who resembled a property agent.

'I saw one of your posters.'

'And why, if we may ask, did you follow up?'

'Don't know. Suppose I'm tired of life. A little bit.'

'Really?' said the property agent clone, turning his coffee cup in a half circle.

'Interesting,' said the less friendly Fujii Mina, tapping a pen on the desk.

'*Kuso*,' said the South-East Asian man, pulling on the string of his *Hard Kaur Priestess* hoodie.

'Was there anything else which attracted you, young man?'

'Well...I guess I'm looking for the other thing too. Something different.'

'Is that so?' replied the property agent clone, rotating his cup back the other way.

'Intriguing,' said Fujii Mina, tapping harder.

The South-East Asian man grunted *keuso* again and scratched his chin, seeming to lift up his entire face in the process. Wait, was that-...

I looked closer.

It was. The guy was wearing a fake face.

'And you can commit to this fully?'

'What?'

'I said...' repeated the property agent clone, slowly, to an almost patronizing degree. 'Can you fully commit to this venture?'

I switched back to him, or attempted to. My eyes were still drawn to the one with the mask. 'Well, to be honest, I'm not completely sure I know what I'm committing to. I mean, the poster was a bit vague.'

'Yes, I suppose that's true,' agreed the property agent clone.

The fake South-East Asian man, or the Japanese man with the South-East Asian face, made a deep groaning noise, possibly affirmation. I didn't get it...why was he pretending to be South-East Asian? Equality quotas? Identity crisis? Didn't he know how weird it looked?

'Do you have any specific questions you'd like us to answer?'

I glanced at the fake South-East Asian man, but vetoed the obvious one and thought of another.

'Yeah. What exactly do you do here?'

'Good question.' The property agent clone stood up straight and walked towards me, blocking out two of the four lights above. 'What we do, young man, is adjust people. Young people between eighteen and thirty, ideally. Using physics, a pinch of biology, a little state-of-the-art medical surgery, specific things like that, we adjust them into something new and different. And exciting.'

He looked back at his two colleagues and they both nodded.

Clearly emboldened, he began walking circles around my chair, moving side-on every time I tried to look him directly in the eye.

'To be more precise, we take you from what you are now and turn you into a different person, then relocate you to a different place. I suppose this wasn't explicit on the poster, yet there was an assumption that this would be the case, no?'

'Err...I suppose.'

'You see, young man, we want you to be happy. Science wants you to be happy. Therefore, it is our intention to alter you in order to achieve said state.'

He stopped and put a hand on my shoulder. This time the four glowing orbs behind him lit up the sides of his face, almost like a devil's halo. Intentional?

'New memories, new thoughts, new face...a new you in every possible way.'

'In a new place,' added Fujii Mina, resting the tip of the pen against her neck.

I nodded, processing the words. I didn't know for sure, but it seemed like...it sounded like these...slightly unnerving scientists were giving me a viable way out. In a room that looked like a futuristic torture chamber.

'Do you have any more questions?'

I did have one. 'The adjustment part. Is there any possible way...whatever it is you're gonna do can...hurt me?'

'Certainly not.'

'Err...can I get some details on that?'

'What you mean, brother?' the fake South-East Asian man asked, accent shifting a little.

I faced him, almost instantly shifting downwards to the stern Indian woman printed on the front of his hoodie [the mask was too distracting].

'I mean, what exactly will you do to me? Like, the procedures? Operations?'

'*Kuso*, brother.' The fake South-East Asian man leaned back in his chair, laughing. 'That's you going into the weeds right there.'

'You mean you can't tell me?'

The property agent clone put his other hand on my shoulder. 'Young man, there is an answer to your question, obviously, but I'm afraid it is far too technical.'

'Can you try?'

The three scientists looked at each other.

'I'm not dumb,' I added, sitting up straight in the chair. 'I do know some science...standard level...from VR games.'

'Very well, young man,' said the property agent clone, returning to the desk and picking up a remote control. 'We'll try the basics, see how we go.'

The fake South-East Asian man leaned out of his chair and pulled down the blind that had already been covering ninety-five per cent of the window.

Almost immediately, a brain appeared on the projection wall. Then flickered. Then vanished. Then came back. Then vanished again.

'Silly machine...,' said the property agent clone, whacking the metal box at the side of the projection.

The brain returned, with minimal buffering. Not a real brain, of course, but a cartoon drawing of one. The property agent clone picked up a stick from the desk and walked closer to the image.

'This is the theory. Point one, the mental aspect.' He pointed at a specific part of the cartoon brain. 'The human brain is generally a lazy organ...and the Spantolibro-Empart is by far the laziest part, existing as what we call our *identity*...meaning the sum total of all our experiences and thoughts and analyses of those experiences and thoughts. As you can see it is not a huge segment of the overall mass, maybe somewhere between 16-18%. Understand so far?'

'Yes,' I lied.

The property agent clone looked at the other two and shrugged.

Fujii Mina responded with a hushed, 'interesting.'

The fake South-East Asian man laughed first, then borderline growled, '*keuso*, brother, boy don't understand shit about shit.'

I looked down at the floor, playing back his words, trying to figure out how many accents he was mixing together. It sounded ridiculous. Like Keanu Reeves attempting Swahili.

'Comprehension or not, we shall continue.' The property agent clone went back to the cartoon brain and pointed at other areas, each one lighting up as he touched them. 'We can theorise two things. One, the majority of the human brain is non-performing, and two, there is room for a new, far broader identity. With intense electro-defintrialist stimulation to the right areas, specifically the canto-gaibutric and the slotadabitric emparts, we can install new data, i.e. a new identity, whilst at the

same time erasing the dominant alcretic-stems of the previous one i.e. the personality. The benefits are of course substantial, I think you'll agree, young man. Not only will you possess a new identity, but you will, more pertinently, possess a broadened one. You will be able to recall skills from your previous self, including the ability to pick up your original vessel's native language faster than natural, if you so desire, If not, you will simply remember fragments, yet be unable to communicate in any meaningful way. Akin to a dog, if you require a close analogue...'

'A dog?'

'On the other hand, due to increased cerebral activity, you will be able to excel at various subjects that, previously, seemed annoyingly dense. For instance, political theory, philosophy, Tarkovsky interpretation, poker...'

'Wait...I have another question.'

'Only one?'

'Yeah. Maybe. I don't know yet, I need a little more time to-...'

'Go ahead, young man. Ask your question.'

I looked at the picture of the cartoon brain and remembered the thing he'd said about sixteen or eighteen per cent. 'The part I don't get is...why don't we use more of our brains already? It doesn't make sense...does it?'

'It does to us people of science, I assure you.'

'But-...'

'I did warn you it was a detailed and esoteric subject, young man.'

'Yeah, I know. I can follow what you're saying, mostly, I just-...'

'This shit is technical,' cut in the fake South-East Asian scientist, his accent now semi-Jamaican. 'You hear me, brother? It's heavy shit.'

'Precisely. What my colleague is telling you is undoubtedly true. Science is a difficult subject for the layman to comprehend.' The property agent clone put his stick back on the desk, clearing his throat. 'Perhaps it's best if you just trust us, young man. Understand that we know what we are doing, and what we are doing is a wonderful, liberating thing. Is that agreeable to you?'

'Another question,' I said, still looking at the cartoon brain.

'Yes?'

'You said that you erase the old identity.'

'That's correct.'

'But why? I mean, if there's so much space not being used in the rest of the brain, why can't you have two identities. Maybe one is passive and the other is active. I don't know exactly, but isn't that better?'

'Oh no, young man. That's a terrible idea.'

'*Kuso*, brother. That shit is chaos.'

The Fujii Mina scientist adjusted the frame of her glasses and muttered, 'childish.'

'But, I don't get it. Why?'

The property agent clone pressed a button. The cartoon brain disappeared from the projection wall.

'I think we've reached a limit here, young man. Science, as we've already explained, is a complicated business. Your question, of course has an answer, but it is simply too technical to explain.'

'But...'

'All you need to understand is that the operation is completely safe, the benefits far outweigh the hazards, and once it's done you'll be two hundred and seventy-two per cent smarter.'

'I will?'

'Guaranteed.'

'Oh.' I looked at the projection wall again, seeing the residual haze of the cartoon brain hanging on in ghost form. 'Wait...what about my body?'

'Yes, we were just coming to that.'

The property agent clone pressed a button and another image replaced the ghost on the projection wall. This one displayed two blank, human forms laid out next to each other, no faces or organs or veins apparent.

'Point two, the physical aspect. This is the easier of the two procedures, simply because the technology has been available for the last twelve years. Using *Diabolik-Craspian 89* techniques, we are able to re-shape the face to make any ethnicity

resemble another, no matter how distinctively oppositional they may be. In short, we can take a Japanese face, like yours, and turn you into Yaphet Kotto, if we so desired.'

'You're gonna-...I'm gonna look like a black guy?'

'Ah, you've heard of him. Interesting. But, no, I'm afraid all our black subjects are taken. Taken weeks ago, in fact. Very popular model. Second only to Iranian.' The scientist looked at the two body outlines on the screen. 'No, the candidate we have lined up for you is...let's see...ah, yes, a young man from Liverpool, North Britain. 62% Caucasian, I believe, an inch and a half shorter, broader shoulders, extremely-...'

'I'm gonna shrink?'

'Please, let me finish, young man. Yes, the subject is shorter than you, that is something we cannot correct, at least not without doing long term damage to your bones. We can stretch them, but we cannot pull them back in, that has always been the case, but the key point to remember is: it will still be your body. Therefore you will not shrink, you will remain the same height as you are now. The only difference will be your face, and your brain, of course, which will be-...'

'Wait, stop. Slow down a second.'

The property agent clone stood statue still, the stick extended outwards like a wand. 'Yes, young man?'

'I don't know. I just-...I feel like there's a thousand questions I should be asking, but...I can't think of any.'

'That's perfectly natural, don't worry.' He turned to the other two. 'Now, I think that concludes everything, *desu ne?*'

They both nodded.

'Good, good.'

'Wait...I've got another one. A question.'

'About the physical aspect?'

'Yeah.'

'Quickly then...'

'Actually, it's not really a question, I just wanna get it all clear in my head. Basically, what you're saying is, you're gonna do stuff to my brain, while it's still in my

head, improve it, add stuff, whatever. Then you're gonna change my face, here, in Japan, into a British face, but my body will still be the same, no change in height or anything. And when all that's done, you're gonna wake me up and, what? Drop me off in Liverpool?'

'Mostly correct, young man. Though I would make one addition. As I said previously, we cannot shorten your bones, but we can lengthen them and make you broader. Also, we have the ability now to artificially stimulate muscle growth, so you will also appear stronger.'

'How strong?'

'That is not up to us, I'm afraid. Muscle growth is stimulated to match the data received from the other subject.'

'The guy from North Britain...'

'Correct. Fortunately for you, I seem to remember the subject being a gymn fanatic so, yes, you shall in all likelihood be a great deal stronger after this procedure.'

'Can I see a photo of him...before I do the op?'

'No, I'm afraid not.'

'But...what if he's ugly?'

'He is not.'

'You've seen him?'

'I have.'

'What does he look like?'

'I cannot say.'

'Come on, please, just tell me someone he looks like, a movie star or singer, just vaguely. Who is he similar to, facially?'

'I'm sorry, that kind of information is not permitted.'

'Then how do I know if you're telling the truth?'

'*Kuso*, brother.' The fake South-East Asian scientist glared at me. 'You all twisted up in the head.'

'What?'

The Property agent clone coughed. 'Young man, it is part of our criteria to select average to good-looking subjects. Not that we care about beauty, but society as

a whole does, so we must add it to our calculations. Simply put, selecting a physically disadvantaged subject might contaminate our results.'

'So he looks okay then?'

'Yes.'

'Not weird-looking at all?'

'No.'

I nodded. 'Okay then...okay.'

'Now, young man, I think that covers everything. If not, then I'm afraid you'll have to save any further questions until next time.'

'I guess I'm okay for now.'

The property agent clone walked back over to my chair, put his hand on my shoulder, smiled, then moved over to the door.

'Very well, so you agree to the terms?' asked Fujii Mina, the suddenness of her voice plus the sharp tap of her pen against the other guy's cup making me jump a little.

'Sorry?'

'You will submit to the procedure, yes or no?'

'You mean you want an answer now?'

'Before you leave this room today, yes.'

I looked over at the property agent clone for confirmation. He wasn't nodding, but his head was tilted in a way that gave a similar effect.

'Will you submit?' repeated Fujii Mina, the blue lights intensifying behind her.

'I need more time. Way more time. I can't just-...'

The property agent clone coughed again, regaining my attention. 'Time is something we cannot give you. I'm sorry.'

'Not even one day?'

'No.'

'*Kuso*...' I muttered, a little louder than intended.

'What is it to be, young man? A new life in a new country with endless possibilities or this...whatever it is you do now?'

'I don't know. I think-...'

'Great. We'll take that as a yes.'

'Wait, I haven't-...'

'Come back tomorrow, same time and we'll begin.'

'But I didn't-...'

'We will give you the rest of the day, young man, to get everything in order.'

'One day?'

'Precisely. See you tomorrow. Eleven in the morning, if that's not too much trouble?'

'Err...'



Immediate reaction to wholesale life change

[as I walked from the room]

+

No memories, who cares? Did I ask enough questions? Details must be known. What exactly are they doing to my brain? Who will I turn into? Why was that guy pretending to be South-East Asian? Was that a Jamaican accent? Where's Ryu? Why is he not calling back? No. Can't do it, too insane. Wait for the games. Pay Yosh. Stay still. Live like I've always lived. Slug-like. Tsunashima. Wake up late, depressed, stable. Pluto 2270. Moon Factory 7. Occasional unii. Gods, that's my life? Fuck all that. Move, get out. Leave Japan, unii, this. Leave all of it. Your life is a wreck, Keni. You don't want to be here. You never did. You've wanted this fucking wormhole for years. Get the fuck out. Go. Fly. Vanish.

+++

Outside, the posters were all gone.

Position filled, clearly.

I felt a weird kind of peace walking back past the other departments, into the car park, onwards to Hiyoshi station. The branches of the ginkgo trees sensed it too, swaying with almost sentient rhythm. Didn't know if I'd really go through with it, but just the idea that I could...

Liverpool...North Britain...fluent English and Japanese...gym muscles without doing any of the hard work...*keuso*...

+

The kid came out in a daze, swaying, and Yosh followed him outside. Something strange was going on, all the posters had been picked up. 'Fuck, those cleaners got some pace,' Yosh muttered to himself, swatting at a not-in-the-way-at-all ginkgo branch.

+

I stood looking at a random poster on the train, a promotion for Pachinko VR in Shinjuku. A weird thought came. This could be the last time I'd ever look at one of these things using this face. No, scratch that. This could be the last time I'd ever see Pachinko machines. If that's what I really wanted...

+

Yosh sat down next to an old man and watched the kid staring at the wall. Was he thinking about the pointless science lecture he just attended? Or the pending fucking debt he owed? Better be the debt.

+

The narrow street outside Tsunashima station was empty. Somehow evening had come. I went into *Matsuya* on the corner and ate some spiced meat with rice. At least I thought that's what it was. Couldn't remember ordering.

+

Yosh followed the kid out of the station and into Matsuya. Deciding it was time to reveal himself, Yosh stood in line behind the kid and ordered. No recognition. Not a blink. He got his ticket and sat down opposite his oblivious target, staring right across the staff area in the middle. The kid didn't seem to notice him at all, even when he looked up.

What was this? A daydream?

Hypnotism?

+

I walked home across the main bridge, remembering the times I used to ride the bike alongside the river and all the way along the track to the stadium in Shin Yokohama. What else? Ha, the hostess, down by the steps. The phone call she'd got from that other guy, telling her to meet him down an alley in Jiyugaoka. Ha, Saori...that was her name. Saori the nineteen year old hostess.

Scanning back across the other side of the bridge, I pinpointed the exact spot where we'd sat. That might not happen again. Ever. Didn't know much about Liverpool, but I knew it was cold, and the women were fierce. That's what Nozu had said anyway. 'They grab you like a rag doll, Keni. If you don't satisfy them, they let you know.'

That wasn't what it was like with Saori. Or with any Japanese girl. Was I ready to be a rag doll?

+

The kid walked across the bridge and Yosh stayed about twenty yards behind. Tsunashima was a new area for him, though it felt pretty much the same as all the others. Conveni, love hotel, work zombies. The only real novelty was the river.

Out of boredom, Yosh glanced over the railings, noting that the water was appropriately murky. Lots of weeds at the sides too.

+

Back at the dorm block, I moved to shut the gate behind me, but Yosh was there. Like a teleporting ghoul. What the-

He smirked, right hand lurking in his jacket pocket.

Was this real?

We stood in the hallway, staring at each other like mutes. I wondered briefly how he'd gotten past the night security guard downstairs, but then I remembered the mercurial, old shit was snoring when I'd walked past.

Yosh finally spoke, asking me to say something as things were getting awkward. I told him I would have the games for him the next day, like I promised, and he smirked again, saying he'd be right there with me when the post came.

+

The kid tried to close the gate, but Yosh had made up the distance between them. He put his hand out and stopped it, leaving the other hand in his pocket, on the handle of the knife. It was a bit awkward as the kid just froze and Yosh himself wasn't sure if there were extra security guards in this part of the dorm. How could he know that? He'd never been to one of these places before.

Finally, he reached his tolerance level for temple-like silence and asked the kid to say something. Poor thing trembled a little, tried to tell Yosh he'd have the games tomorrow. Yosh smirked and said he'd be right there with him.

+

Yosh told me to go inside the dorm and introduce him to my housemates. 'They're probably not here,' I replied, even though I knew they would be. 'Well, let's have a look, *teme*,' he said back, and helped me guide the key into the front door lock.

+

The kid tried to stop Yosh meeting whichever attractive flat-mate he was hiding inside, so Yosh smirked again and told him to go in.

+

Asami and Hide were sitting in the common area, eating something out of a shared pot. She saw me and patted the space on the cushion next to her, but I shook my head and moved quickly to my room, telling Yosh to follow. Asami asked if I was alright, I told her I had things to do.

+

Yosh went into the common area and saw an average-looking girl with big tits sitting on the couch. Could be a time-filler later, he thought, letting the kid lead him onwards to what was probably his wank cave.

+++

In the room, I turned to Yosh and asked him what he was doing there.

'Babysitting, *teme*.'

'But you told me to come back tomorrow.'

'Changed my mind.'

'But...'

'Don't stress, I'm not gonna do anything. Just a bit of joint relaxation time until the post arrives.'

We sat on the bed, his hand still in the jacket pocket. I asked if he wanted to take his jacket off, briefly thinking of lunging at him if he did, but he said no, better to keep it on.

Kuso...

Thank gods.

I walked over to the window, keeping my face blank as I knew he could see me in the reflection.

'Not gonna draw the curtains?'

'No.'

'Can see the guys opposite. No privacy.'

'It's normal.'

'Okay, *teme*. Suit yourself.'

He looked around at the things in my room, at the VR server with game-cards piled next to it, the posters of alien planets, the sci-fi books on the shelf, the little piles of coins on my desk that either looked like missile silos or silver spaceships. Muttering *fucking coins* pretty loudly, he picked up a larger one, tossing it in the air and catching it. Then laughed and looked at the posters again. 'You only like space, *teme*?'

'No.'

'Feels like it.'

I sat back down on the bed and gestured to other things around the room, things that had no connection to sci-fi.

Following my trail, he picked up one of the books, the Fahey thing that Ryu kept prodding me with.

'So you're one of those anarchist nuts?'

'Not really.'

He put the book back, replacing it with the Bjork biography I'd forgotten to take back to the library.

'Music fan?'

'Sometimes. Not much.'

Whistling half a note, a weak one, he switched to the AKI camera on the top of the shelf.

'You make movies?'

'No.'

'Sex tapes?'

'I never use it.'

He made a *gab* sound, running out of things to investigate.

'So what do you like?'

I shrugged.

'Your shoulders don't speak, *teme*.'

'I...don't know. I like different things at different times.'

'And at this time?'

'Right now?'

'Yeah.'

I'm going to change bodies.

Asami on her back, pulling me in.

Screaming Shailene Woodley.

Bright blue wormhole.

Did Tsukubashi really travel to the Ondōan system?

Was that the real Pluto 2280?

Where's Ryu?

Why is the alien in Alien black?

'Just space stuff, I guess.'

Yosh shook his head. '*Kuso...*'

'What?'

'Those kids in my shopp got more personality than you.'

'Okay.'

I couldn't think of anything else to say, so I stared at the poster of Triton's surface on the wall and said nothing.

'*Kuso*...like talking to a fucking stick. Why don't you patch in to one of my games here? Least then I can relax a bit.'

'I'm okay.'

'No, I'm telling you, patch in. I want to feel relaxed.'

I looked at the VR server and the game-card for *Moon Factory 7*. It was tempting. The card would glitch, but the dorm version would be okay. Twenty minutes of station life and I'd probably forget a psycho was holding me hostage in my own bedroom. But the others would see my face and know something was wrong. They'd ask me straight, what's up? And Yosh would be able to hear everything I said. No, better to sit this thing out. Safer for everyone.

'You're not moving.'

I reached over and took a book off the shelf. *Purple Muon Station*. An absurd sci-fi comedy Tomomi had recommended. 'I'll read this instead.'

'Fine. Do that. I'll go outside and talk to your inflatable flat-mate.'

'No.'

'Sorry?' Yosh kept his hand in the pocket, clearly amused.

'They'll suspect something if you go out there. Might call the police.'

'You mean they think I'm not your friend?'

'Probably.'

Yosh tilted his head, as if that would tell him something extra about me.

'Anyway, the girl is gay.'

Tilted it back the other way.

'Better if we keep things in here, just me and you.'

'*Kasu*...she's really gay?'

'Yes. Hundred per cent.'

'Not bi?'

'She has a girlfriend, stays over sometimes. Green hair, very fierce, barely says anything.'

'Green hair...*kuso*. She looked quite fun too.' He stretched out his legs, letting the shoes hang over the edge by some distance. 'Lot more fun than you are.'

+++

We sat on the bed until the end of the universe.

Or that's what it felt like.

Yosh asked seven times if I was planning on calling up my brother to ask about the games. I told him each time, after clearing the dry anxiety from my throat, that I'd spoken to Ryu earlier and he'd promised the games were in the post and would definitely arrive the next day.

'In the morning?'

'Yeah,' I answered, before remembering the experiment and adding, 'but not here.'

'Where?'

'At the unii.'

'What?'

'He always sends them there. I don't know why.'

'To where exactly?'

'The Physics Department. Near there.' I coughed, riding into the lie, half sure that he'd been following me ever since Jiyugaoka. 'I went there earlier, to check if they'd come...by chance. But nothing.'

He looked left at the Triton poster, processing what I'd just said.

I looked along with him.

'Tomorrow though...definitely.'

+++

A little after twelve, Yosh stretched out his neck, said he was getting tired. I asked if he was gonna go home.

'Told you, *teme*, I'm staying until the games arrive.'

'You're gonna sleep here?'

'Obviously.'

'All night?'

'Don't get stressed about it. I'm a quiet guest. Very respectful.' He grabbed one of the pillows and lay down on the floor, right hand still entrenched in the jacket pocket. 'By the way, I sleep real light. And my hand always moves first...trained reflex. So, don't, *teme*, okay?'

I nodded.

'In words, please.'

'Yes. I won't do anything.'

'Better.'

+

The things that wouldn't leave my mind

[recollected at intervals between attempted sleep]

+

...Ryu. The games. Yosh. Yosh's jacket. Me and Yosh wrestling on the floor. Who would win? Money. Ways to get it. People I knew with it. People who could get it on one hour's notice. The alien. *Void Galaxia*. Captain Eto. Anarchism. Ryu again. Was he okay? Dead? Would he? What kind of person was capable of killing themselves? A psychological query: suicide: inherent, acquired? Attitudes towards death. When will I die? Yosh and his knife. Knife fights on film. Sato Mark 7. The Ondōan zealot. *Beyond The Rabbit Hole*. Could you run? Determination. A philosophy: if you are free, you allow others the same freedom. Was my freedom to run greater than Yosh's freedom to chase? Mine has no end, Yosh's has an end when I am dead or the debt is paid. *Kuso*, the knife. Money. The games. The unii. My lies. They weren't at the unii. The science thing. The exchange. A new life. Would it kill me? Were scientists moral? Would Yosh intervene? Did I want this? Why is the alien in *Alien* black? What does it represent?

+

I turned and picked up the alarm clock.

Double-checked on my phone.

Four thirty-five.

Were scientists moral?

Would Yosh intervene?

Why was the alien in Alien black?

Yosh was on the floor, facing the ceiling with his eyes closed.

I wanted to get up and step over him, get my notebook, a pen, write down some of these thoughts. Patch in to *Moon Factory 7* one last time. Sneak into Asami's room. Throw myself out the window. Research cutting-edge brain experiments at Japanese universities.

Yosh opened one eye and looked right.

'I'm not-...' I started, more mumble than words.

He whistled out air, pulling his hand out from under the pillow and flashing the knife.

I nodded, mouthed *okay*, closed my eyes.

Pictured an open brain.

Surgical lights.

Alien doctor.

Pain.



CHAPTER 13

TSUKUBASHI

RABBIT HOLE

I woke up around eleven, groggy, a kaleidoscope of weirdness lashing round my brain.

Asami naked on a rock, fingering herself with a starfish.

Ryu in a VR homeless camp.

Alien totems on Pluto.

Black alien selling eye insurance.

Yosh with a two metre knife, about to-

Kuso, Yosh...

I rubbed vaguely near my eyes, drawing in the foreground.

My fucking dorm room.

Same as the night before.

Yosh was sitting on the edge of the bed, both eyes open, expression forensically blank, hand still in the jacket pocket.

'You sleep late, *teme*.'

+++

It was a Saturday, so everyone else had either left for the day or was still in bed. Probably the former, knowing my dorm mates, though Asami usually liked to sleep in on at least one of the weekend days.

Yosh followed me into the bathroom and talked while I brushed my teeth. He said he didn't want to do anything, but it may turn out that way.

I asked him through the mirror what he would do.

'Nothing that won't heal.'

I imagined slashes instead of stabs.

'How bad?'

'Just...focus on your teeth. Okay?'

+++

I slid open the door to the dorm common room and held it for him. He stayed where he was, zipping his jacket up another inch, checking back on the other bedroom doors.

She's gay cropped up in my head again, but I didn't bother saying it.

Same for *stop peeping, you psycho*.

Instead, I just stood there, holding the door frame like a butler.

'You lead,' Yosh said, turning back round.

+++

After passing the dayshift security guy, face a millimetre from his phone screen, I muttered, 'fuck,' and set course for the station.

The residential street leading to the bridge was deserted, the sky overcast, and that's about all I took in as my head was loaded with raw chaos. Images of fake scientists and slippery game-cards, being shivved in the back...Ryu getting on a plane to Brazil...my brain in a jar next to some jacked-up white kid, straw in hand, ragged-looking patch on his temple...*Harem Survival 4* lodged in a server the size of a factory chimney.

Pushing down the sudden shot of anxiety, I glanced back to see how far Yosh was behind. About ten metres, more or less, with a vacant expression on his face. He obviously wasn't worried about me making a run for it.

To be honest, neither was I.

My legs were moving and that was all I knew.

+

The kid walked ahead to the station and Yosh followed a few metres behind. He was sure the little space weirdo was lying about the games going to the unii, but what did it matter? No games, then cash. No cash, then...

He punched the lower part of his back, still feeling a slight twinge from sleeping on the floor all night.

+

As the station came into view, my phone rang. I picked it up and held the screen close to my ear so Yosh wouldn't see. It was Mum. She said in rough staccato that Ryu had jumped into a river, that he was dead. She tried to say more, but couldn't. I told her I had to go to class, but I'd call back as soon as it was done.

'Kentaro, please, you don't understand. It's not-...they said he's-...they told me he's gone.'

I hung up.

Nope.

No way.

She was lying, had to be. All that time alone...it had driven her insane.
Delusional.

A river?

You couldn't die from that, not in Osaka.

It was ludicrous.

And even if he did go under, survival instinct would kick in and bring him back to the surface. Unless his clothes were heavy or he'd tied a rock to-...

Something hit the top of my legs.

The ticket gate barrier.

I tried to push through but it wouldn't budge, and then the station attendant was shouting something directly at me...something about a card-ticket.

+

The kid picked up his phone and tried to hide it in front of his ear. Yosh guessed it was his brother, probably saying he couldn't deliver the games.

Predictable...

Then the weirdo hit the barrier, trying to push his way through without swiping his card.

What the fuck?

+

After staring at the < *Hiyoshi* sign like a hypnotised simpleton, I registered the blurred arrival-façade of the train and got on. Yosh did the same one door down, standing nonchalantly opposite two police officers. The nihilist in me thought about pointing them towards the gangland thug, but what was the point?

Everything was already set.

My phone buzzed, the first chunk of an essay from Mum.

I understand, Kentaro. It's never the ideal time to receive this kind of news, yet I suggest we attempt to put on a brave face together and deal with it as Ryu would've wanted us to.

As formal as ever, but not insane. And not lying either.

Ryu was dead. Stone dead. His body in a morgue somewhere in Osaka.

Dead. He was dead. Cold and dead. Deadly cold. Not here. Gone. Dead and-

I rubbed my eyes and then pulled at the eyelid as if something were stuck in there.

Focus.

The games weren't coming. They hadn't been coming even when he was alive. Which meant Yosh was gonna...do superficial things to me. Unless...unless I gave my brain to science and got the fuck away from Tsunashima. No, farther than that...away from Japan, Yosh, Mum. *This*. All these fucking zombies.

I looked out the train window, at the dark underground walls guiding us in to Hiyoshi.

My Ondōan wormhole...a void-looking void...

Fuck it, why not? Go and don't look back. Leave Japan, leave all of it.
There's nothing to pine for here, look forward to, anticipate ...no Ryu...nothing.

+

Yosh stood watching the kid and, using his phone as cover, the police officers. It's only one stop, Yosh thought. And the kid wouldn't tell.

Tell what?

They weren't even standing next to each other.

Yosh took his hand out of the jacket pocket and tried to go back to looking non-plussed, blank.

On the seat nearby, a baby started bawling, pointing its tiny hand at his neck tattoo.

Fucking midgets, thought Yosh, pulling up his collar.

+

The uniiversity was Harajuku-level crowded.

Which confused me for a second...until I checked my phone and realized it was Friday, not Saturday.

A group from my dorm block, one of them quite pretty, passed by and I got hit by the sudden feeling that it was the last time I'd ever see her. And Asami. And all the other pretty ones on my course that I hadn't got round to chasing yet.

But this science exchange thing...would put me at another unii, with other students. There'd still be other pretty girls to see. Hopefully not as fierce as what Nozu described.

Shailene Woodley maybe...or a decent lookalike. Younger, same personality, better Japanese skills.

+

Yosh tightened his arms as he walked past the pretty girls, and then remembered he was wearing a jacket. He quickly took it off and tightened his arms again, holding the jacket in a certain way as to make his muscles permanently tense.

+

I walked the same route as yesterday and arrived at the Physics Department. Before going in I looked back at Yosh and did a salute. He stared back, confused,

then pointed at his watch and drew a big circle in the air. One hour? One minute?
Who cared, I'd never see him again.

+

The kid stopped outside the same place as yesterday and performed a salute. Yosh stared back, suspicious, and mimed to the kid that he had one hour. After hanging back for thirty seconds, Yosh walked past the door and watched the target following a guy in a white coat into another room. He shrugged and walked up to the same spot he'd stood in the day before.

+++

The property agent clone in the white coat, the one who'd led the interview the day before, strapped me down on a huge, bleakly metallic operating table. Surrounding us were walls with square-shaped mini-screens, each one containing a tiny red dot that was expanding and expanding and expanding until it blinked out of existence and started the process all over again. In terms of related imagery, all I could think of was an Ondōan EK-bot's eyeball. Not the most soothing reference ever.

'What are you going to do exactly?' I asked several times, trying to ignore the creepy light show.

'The procedure we talked about, young man.'

'Can you explain it one more time?'

'That won't be necessary.'

I looked between and around the red dots for other scientists. There were two men, middle-aged, glasses, standing near something that looked like a train station ticket gate. Both had clipboards in their hands, though I suspected they weren't actually doing anything with them as there were no pens or mobile pointers.

The property agent clone finished the straps and told me it was now impossible for any of my limbs to wriggle free. 'Do you feel comfortable?' he added, the giant red dot to the side of his head reaching its zenith.

'Not really.'

'Is it the table?'

'Yeah, the table. It's not cushioned.'

'No problem then, you'll be under soon.'

One of the other science coats came over [without clipboard] and whispered something in his ear.

'Apologies, young man, it looks like we'll have to wait a little longer.'

'Why?'

'Lunch-time has materialised.'

Laughing at his own line, he walked off with the other man to the opposite side of the room. They sat down around a half-moon table, lifted their briefcases and pulled out plastic evidence bags with sandwiches squeezed awkwardly inside. The science coat who'd already started eating put his sandwich down, reached for the remote and turned off the red dots. In their place, a larger screen formed, almost cinema-size.

'Can you see it okay?' he shouted.

'Me?'

'Yes, you. Can you see the screen?'

I twisted my neck a little, but couldn't see much.

'It hurts,' I answered.

One of the men put down his sandwich and came over. With one hand, he flipped the table so it was vertical.

'How about now?'

My head was pointed projector-like directly at the screen. I couldn't really look at anything else.

'Yeah, now it's okay.'

'Bonza,' he said, slapping the side of my torture slab and headed off.

'Hey, wait...excuse me. When's this thing gonna happen?'

'After the sandwich, brother. After the sandwich.'

He sat back down at the table and the three of them ate their sandwiches while I lay, or hung [I wasn't sure what you'd call the position I was in], and watched a very stern news reporter talk about rogue AI litter bins on a rampage through downtown Nagoya.

The three so-called scientists ate their sandwiches slowly.

No conversation.

Just chewing noises.

The news report changed from bins to the assassination of an overseas general. I couldn't catch the name of the country, but the street shots looked Middle Eastern and the govt. spokesperson referenced a suspicious new clothing depot on its border that had the US written all over it, so I assumed it was Iran.

A yawn started forming in my throat and I made no moves to stop it.

Was it possible to give an anesthetic if I was already asleep?

Would it still work?

Twenty minutes later, they were still eating, and making conversation too. Nanobot AI signals out near Neptune? Was that what they were saying?

I moved my face a couple of inches closer, but couldn't catch anything else.

'*Kuso*, Keni, what are you doing here?' I muttered.

+

Imaginings From The Vertical Table

+

...scalpel, comically large needles, serum. What was serum? Juice? Fuck, juice, through the needle and into...into where? My head? Memories, that's what they were after. Jab in the head, long, thin piece of metal, deleting fluid. And the scalpel? Had to be the face. They were gonna change it. Cut me open, wide open, like a skin jacket. Ryu...Ryu...they'd be doing the same thing to him now, on a slab somewhere. Blue face, eyes closed, water from the river spilling out...'come back, big brother...come back...please, don't leave me this-...'

+

Another fifteen minutes and they were still munching on their sandwiches.

Maybe that's where the AI nanobots were? After breaking down the bready gunk in their mouths, the little bugs reformed it and let them chew again. A never-ending sandwich. That would explain the decade I'd been waiting on this crypto-torture rack bizarro cinema horror fuck thing.

'New sonic shower, vaporizes germs directly off the top of your skin,' said a robotic voice on the faraway screen.

Fucking adverts now?

Right, that's it.

I moved my head off the table again, a few inches, and shouted, 'hey guys,' as loud as my nerves would allow.

'Chill, brother,' one of the men bit back.

'Yes, young man?' the property agent clone asked, turning off the screen.

'Is this gonna happen any time soon?'

They exchanged glances.

'Because I'm getting a little tired over here.'

Another tap on the remote and the red dots were playing out their routine on the walls again. Satisfied, the property agent clone folded up his evidence bag and put it back in his briefcase. 'Very well, young man. We shall begin.'

Finishing the crusts of their sandwiches, the other two followed the lead of the only one I could remember the face of and ambled over to the table. They took up a position on each side, while the property agent clone hovered right next to my ear.

'Now, we're just going to give you something to put you under, it should only take a few minutes and then, when you're unconscious, we'll begin.'

The drone scientist on the left walked away and came back with a trolley. There was one needle placed diagonally across.

'No scalpels?' I asked.

'Young man, we're not barbarians.'

The other drone ducked behind the table, dragging something back round to the front. When he returned to his original position, I could see what it was.

'Is that a...robot?' I stuttered.

'This, young man, is an instrument of science.'

'It looks like a gun.'

'Yes, a laser gun.'

'What?'

'Sorry, I thought you heard. It's a laser gun.'

I checked the straps around my wrists. Not loose enough.

'I heard you, but-...'

'With this instrument, we will be able to make the appropriate alterations to your face.'

'You're going to shoot a laser into my head?'

'*Kuso*, brother,' the drone on the left muttered.

'Well, in a way, yes, that is correct, but it's perfectly painless. And you'll be unconscious throughout the whole process.'

He tapped the top of my head like it was a boiled egg.

On the sandwich side of the room, the phone rang and the right-side drone strolled off to answer it. A few seconds later, he came back and told the others something I couldn't quite hear.

'Apologies, young man, another interview.'

The two drones rushed across the room and disappeared through different doors. The property agent clone stayed behind, grinning at me like a Shinto evangelical.

'Quite exciting, science, don't you think?'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, young man, there are things we can do that make the mind boggle. And, you see, most of it would've been inconceivable just a few decades ago...yet that's it, that's the fascination. Only a few decades and things are refreshed, so there's never any danger of slipping into that rut...*science block*, I believe someone called it. I would use the term *scientists' block* myself, a much more apt title, but the meaning is ostensibly the same.'

The laser gun was staring at me, absolutely fucking merciless.

'Look, I don't wanna piss you off or anything, but can you tell me what it is you're gonna do?'

He put his hand on the barrel of the laser.

'Young man, I wish I could but, as I've stated previously, science is a technical business. It's simply too advanced for you to comprehend.'

One of the doors opened and the stern Fujii Mina lookalike from the previous day marched out.

The other door opened and the fake South-East Asian scientist emerged.

'What the-...'

'If you'll excuse us, young man.'

'Wait...'

The three of them regrouped and left through the same door I'd used to come in, leaving the laser gun behind as my silent guard-dog.

+++

The red dots growing and imploding and growing again and imploding again and growing again and imploding again and growing again in the background may have been unnerving to me, but they were apparently non-existent to the laser gun, or, at the very least, categorized as normal background lighting on its sensors.

If it had sensors.

I wasn't sure.

It was hard to discern anything much from the position I was in, not to mention the lack of communication from the machine itself. Could it replicate speech? Maybe. It had what looked like a beak. And it was probably less prone to sophistry than those other three...oddball scientists.

Yes. Conversation. It was worth a try. Better than just lying here.

'Hey...'

I said softly, adjusting my position as much as possible so as to minimize the neon blitzkrieg coming in from the red lights.

The laser gun held its form.

'How's it going?'

No answer.

'Nothing new? Okay, that's normal, I guess.'

No answer.

'Can you speak?'

No answer.

'You know...it might be the angle, I don't know, but you look a bit like an animal.'

No answer.

'You know that?'

No answer.

'Are you AI?'

No answer.

'I mean, do you have AI?'

No answer.

'I bet you do.'

No answer.

'That's why you have the animal shape, right?'

No answer.

'That's why I feel confident talking to you.'

No answer.

'Yeah, I think you can understand me.'

No answer.

'Can't you?'

No answer.

'Can you hear me?'

No answer.

'Can you understand me?'

No answer.

'I think you can, *teme*. I think you can.'

No answer.

'I think you know what I'm saying.'

No answer.

'Listen, *teme*. I've changed my mind about all of this.'

No answer.

'Most of it. The surgery part.'

No answer.

'I mean, what I'm saying is...I don't wanna do this until I know exactly what it is they're gonna do.'

No answer.

'That's reasonable, isn't it?'

No answer.

'I think it is.'

No answer.

'So...if you could just remove these straps...maybe I could sit down a while and wait for the other guys to come back and...'

No answer.

'Please, *teme*.'

No answer.

'Just take off the straps...I'll do the rest.'

No answer.

'At least loosen them.'

No answer.

'That beak/claw thing, you can use that.'

No answer.

'You can do that much, right?'

No answer.

'Please.'

No answer.

'*Kuso*, you understand me, don't you?'

No answer.

'Look, I told you already. I've changed my mind...I won't do this until they give me more details.'

No answer.

'You understand?'

No answer.

'It's unethical, *teme*. If they do this, it's unethical.'

No answer.

'Legally. By law. They can't do this to someone who doesn't want it...right?'

No answer.

'You have an ethics program surely.'

No answer.

'I mean, you know right and wrong...morals, ethics, whatever...right?'

No answer.

'It's basic, you must do.'

No answer.

'Ethics. Morals. No?'

No answer.

'Look, I'll test you. One question. Do you want to do this to someone who doesn't want it done?'

No answer.

'Do you want to do this to me?'

No answer.

'I mean, you know what it is you do, right? You know what happens?'

No answer.

'Don't you?'

No answer.

'No, you don't...do you?'

No answer.

'*Kuso*. Fuck.'

No answer.

'Look, you're a gun, *teme*. A laser gun.'

No answer.

'You know what that means?'

No answer.

'You don't, do you?'

No answer.

'*Kuso*...'

No answer.

'It means you're a weapon, *teme*.'

No answer.

'It means a laser is going to come out of the end of your barrel, your mouth there...and it's gonna go into my head. It's going to burrow right into my brain and change me, you understand?'

No answer.

'You do understand.'

No answer.

'I know you understand.'

No answer.

'*Kuso*...'

No answer.

'This isn't right.'

No answer.

'Let me go, *teme*.'

No answer.

'Please.'

No answer.

'I know you don't want to do this.'

No answer.

'Do you?'

No answer.

'Do you?'

No answer.

'*Kuso*, you do...'

No answer.

'You do want to do this.'

No answer.

'I knew it.'

No answer.

'You wanna fuck up my brain.'

No answer.

'*Kasu*.'

No answer.

'Fucking animal.'

No answer.

'Fucking AI animal piece of stupid metal fucking shit.'

No answer.

'I don't care how you justify it, you're just a mindless, follow dumb fucking orders animal *kasu* fuck.'

No answer.

'You hearing me?'

No answer.

'Animal.'

No answer.

'Hope you fucking explode...blow up...die in a fucking metal ditch.'

+++

A short while later, the weird scientists returned.

The property agent clone, the Fujii Mina lookalike and the fake South-East Asian guy.

My vision was a bit blurred from the constant barrage of red-light, but it seemed like the laser gun turned and nodded at them. Which meant it was sentient. And unethical.

Dusting something off his jacket, the property agent clone walked over and asked me how I was doing. I tried to think of a polite way of ordering him to get me down, but none materialised.

'I'm tired,' I said instead.

'That's excellent, young man, exactly the right feeling to have.'

'My arms hurt...'

'*Kuso*, man, you lucky you got arms,' the fake South-East Asian guy said.

'Lucky?'

'Brother...' he edited quickly, picking the needle up from the tray.

'Are you ready then, young pup?'

The man patted the laser gun and asked it the same question. Again, it nodded.

'No, wait. Hold on a second. Stop.'

'Yes?'

'I don't know if I can go through with this.'

'Why? What's wrong?'

'It's...'

'Yes?'

The fake South-East Asian guy held up the needle and, without ceremony, slid it into my neck. I saw the tip go in but couldn't feel a thing, like it was someone else's neck.

'Honestly...'

'Yes, honesty, young man,' said the property agent clone. 'Truth. If you have doubts of science it is important that you voice such things.'

I thought of Yosh waiting for me outside, knife hand in the jacket pocket.

'It's just...I'm not...sure...this is...'

I couldn't finish the sentence. Too tired, way too...tired.

'No strong doubts then?'

My eyes were closing.

'No...don't wanna...please...get me...'

'He's fine,' said the Fujii Mina lookalike, adjusting the metal slab [and me] to a slightly tilted angle.

'Good, good. Under you go then.'

Losing word power, I attempted to spit on them, but my mouth wasn't working either. It was just too much effort. As was keeping my eyes open.

'Under, under, under the sea,' said the fake South-East Asian guy, in an off-key melody. 'Where the fish are dark and the gods are green. Under, under, under the sea. Where the fish are dark and the...'

It was enough.

I let my eyes go, the faces, the room.

The laser gun stayed as an outline etched onto the inside of my eyelids, but only for a second. Then it was gone too.

+

The Science Behind The Science

+

Subject: Male, 21,

Height: 184cm

Ethnicity: 100% Japanese, no other trace ethnicity.

Face: a little better than average.

Story: tired of life, wants something different.

Suspected truth: running from debts. Poor eyesight suggests subject is a gamer. Debtors could be Ikebukuro or Shinjuku group.

Procedure: face implants, memory wipe/ implants, language implants.

Method: laser gun

Details: too technical to detail here.

Procedure details: Subject put under at 14:24. Laser gun warmed up. The lead scientist, Takayama, decided the face could be done last, and the best initial course of action would be to tackle the memory. The first supporting scientist, Arao, proceeded to wash the subject's head. The second supporting scientist, Hidayat, found an entry point on the temple. Scientist Takayama used the laser to drill an 8mm hole into the temple, with limited fringe disruption. The laser was then set to *memory wipe amber* and used for seventeen minutes, targeting the previously selected areas of the brain [acquired from scans during the subject's interview]. Next, Scientist Arao cleaned the barrel of the laser and changed the setting to *memory implant tangerine*. Using the received files from the exchange subject, Scientist Hidayat input the new memories into the subject. This part of the procedure took approximately twenty-two minutes. Next, Scientist Arao brought over the English grammar textbook and scanned it into the laser field. The same process was repeated for the book of

colloquialisms, the book of idioms and, finally, the book of gutter-speak. All input information was then transferred to the selected area of the subject's brain and combined with the existing data. At this point the laser malfunctioned and sparks flew, prompting Scientists Arao and Takayama to exit the room and find tools to fix it. Scientist Hidayat remained alone with the subject.

+

**The Fake South-East Asian Scientist, The Laser Gun And Kentaro's
Brain [A Brief Farce]**

+

The fake South-East Asian Scientist stood next to the laser, picking at his mask, scratching a little.

'*Kuso*,' he mumbled, 'still itches like hell.'

Kentaro lay still on the metal slab, eyes closed, perhaps dreaming.

Inside the head, his brain was trying to sort out all the things that had been going on. There were a load of new words, a stack of missing memories, two contradictory childhoods, four parents, and a recurring question, *why is the alien black?*

Still perplexed, the fake South-East Asian Scientist bent down and examined the base of the laser gun, scratching his chin.

'Okay, LAP, we don't need to wait for those guys. It's either the main DOT wiring or the CAT auxiliaries...right?'

The laser stood still, its barrel mere millimetres from the hole in the side of Kentaro's head.

'Come on...give me a clue, brother.'

The fake South-East Asian Scientist, despite his distinguished background in science, couldn't figure it out, not one bit of it.

Frustrated, he stood up and kicked the LAP dead in the base.

The LAP instantly came back to life and a red line shot out like a simulated laser into Kentaro's head.

Then stopped.

Then started.

Then stopped.

It shook violently and a thicker red line appeared, almost twice the width of the old one.

'Kuso, kuso...'

The fake South-East Asian Scientist put his hand close to the laser, but was too scared to do anything concrete.

'LAP, what the hell are you-...stop, fucking stop. Come on. I'm begging you. Stop!'

The door opened and the other two scientists walked in.

The fake South-East Asian Scientist looked over at them, the laser pounding the side of Kentaro's head, and stepped slowly away from the LAP with both hands raised.

'Not me,' he said, in a thick Osaka accent, tilting his neck suggestively at the LAP.

CHAPTER 14

HALF-ALTERED BEAST

'What I need is robot legs.'

'Sure.'

'Or metal plating on my knees. No, metal skin all over. Even better.'

'Metal robot legs?'

'Or graphene.'

'Wouldn't they rust in the shower?'

'Hmm. Correction. Un-rustable graphene metal robot legs that can't get wet.

And if they get hit or impacted or something...hey, you remembering this? It's important.'

'I'll get a pen and paper.'

The female student in the navy blue artist robes stood up and looked at the desk near the entrance of the science building, and that was about it. Tutting for the cheap[ish] seats, the male student with scattershot green hair grabbed her arm, yanking it towards him.

'Get off...'

'If I can't be bionic then you'll have to be my legs.'

'No way.'

'Come on...'

'I'm not a fucking robot, Sion.'

'Wah, you don't know that.'

'Serious?'

'Mechanical stuff is inside, kaizo face, not exterior. Like wires instead of veins, oil not blood, that kind of thing.'

'Kaizo face?'

'Arms up, it's carrying time.'

'Get off.'

'No moaning.'

'Off me, you fucking nut...'

Yosh watched from the corner as the two idiot academics walked out of the building, the guy trying to climb on the girl's back. Is that how students talk now? he wondered, blowing out a fairly smooth trail of smoke. Robot legs and back-climbing...just so he could paw at her tits?

Thinking about it, the whole dialogue didn't sound that much different from the kids back in his shopp.

Maybe he hadn't missed out after all.

A beeping sound, electronic, somewhere above his head.

Yosh burnt down more of the cigarette, his eighth that afternoon. Or the eighth since his package had disappeared inside that weird science room.

One of the doors in the corridor opened and around fifty, sixty kids streamed out, all yapping, all carrying study books. Yosh took another drag and tried to read the covers of some as they flowed past.

Biological Representations of the Other.

Genes: a study in dynamics and regression.

The Foundation Pit.

Some of the students glanced at him as they passed, fixing onto the cigarette, and then the tattoo. Yosh took another drag, noticed a girl in a tight top, rolled down his sleeve.

Genes, regression, dynamics...it sounded obtuse, way too obtuse for him, but that didn't mean all that much. The thing these kids didn't have - common sense - that's the thing that got you somewhere.

Unless you were applying to be a scientist.

But still...there was that kid he'd seen an hour earlier, slouched on the floor like a beggar, playing the old school *Zelda* hack on his laptop. That one didn't even know how to get across the desert without getting scuffed by the sand monsters. And that was basic.

Didn't matter how much academic stuff was piled up in there, the kid had no common sense, no innovation.

Another pretty student walked past, thick rim glasses, parody *Harem* t-shirt, too coy to look him in the eye.

Neither do I, really, thought Yosh, watching the girl join her friends outside. Well, not much. But whatever I got, there's more of it than what the floor kid's got.

He dropped the cigarette next to the others and stubbed it out. Nearby were some of those flyers again. Where the hell were they coming from? He'd kicked the last few round the corner two hours ago, now they'd self-replicated.

He picked one up and read it for the third time.

Still didn't make much sense.

Forever Exchange. Become a new you. Or something.

Yosh glanced at the door to the science room, not really expecting to see anything. Only one student had gone in there the whole afternoon, nobody else. And stayed in there. Devoutly. Whatever Keni was learning or doing inside, it must've been complicated.

Fucking science...

Fucking mini-academics and their robot-...

He paused his right hand at the lips, forgetting there was no longer a cigarette, and looked at the flyer again.

Become a new you.

Forever exchange.

A new you.

Contact: Physics Department

Something clicked.

He looked at the door again, and this time it was different. It wasn't a door to a university faculty office, it was a door to some bizarre science experiment he didn't really understand.

But the flyer... a new you... *kenso*, was that really what the kid was doing in there?

What did *new you* even mean?

Physical? Mental?

He walked quickly to the door, pushed it open and then carried on through to a small office with a cheap, foldable desk, and a stern-faced woman tucked in rigid behind it. He knew she was stern because she had her hair in a bun and was typing the same way those Tier-4 cyborgs did.

'Hello.'

More typing.

'Hey, hello, you in there? I'm looking for someone.'

She tapped a few more keys then looked up. 'Yes?'

'Student, male, name's Keni. No, wait... Kentaro. Kentaro...'

'Does your friend have a full name?'

'Yeah, I'm thinking. Kentaro... Kentaro something.'

'Is he a student of the faculty?'

'What? No, he went in there... about two hours ago. I saw him.'

'I see.'

'Okay. The student in there now, where is he?'

'I'm sorry, all patient data is classified and confidential.'

'No, I just said, I saw him go in. I'm his-... I'm his brother... Ryu. Go in there, tell him Ryu's here.'

'That is odd.'

'What?'

'He's your brother, but you don't know his full name.'

'Yeah, not really. Not that odd.' Yosh stretched out the last word, stalling, searching the blank wall for ideas, hitting something semi-believable. 'See, he's adopted. I'm not.'

'Adopted?'

'Actually, we're not that close. He went to boarding school when he was eleven, I stayed and...yeah, that's it. He's my brother. Now, can I go in?'

She smiled, a clear sign a negative was coming. 'I'm sorry, it is not permitted to interrupt the procedures, if indeed your brother is undergoing-...'

'It's urgent, a family issue. I have to see him.'

'I'm sorry, the rules are quite clear.'

'Rules? For what? What's happening in there? What procedure?'

'I'm sorry, you'll have to consult the flyer and come back when you-...'

'Stop saying sorry, just tell me the basics. What are they doing in there?'

Her face buffered, one of her fingers tapping the air a centimetre above the keyboard. 'I'll have to ask you to leave now.'

'Ask your fucking self, that's my brother they're fucking with. Tell me.'

'I'm sorry, I do not respond to that kind of tone or language. And perhaps next time, you might want to come up with a better story.'

'Huh? What story?'

'Adopted kids tend to use their adoptive family's name, even if they did go to boarding school.'

Yosh dipped a hand in his jacket pocket and fingered the face of the blade. There were no cameras that he could see, and he wouldn't need to actually cut the witch; just scare her enough to get some information.

'Look...if you don't tell me what's going on, I'm just gonna go in there and find out for myself. Understand?'

'If you don't leave, I'll be forced to call security.'

'Who, those arthritic pensioners with the plastic sticks?'

'Five seconds.'

'Fuck that, I'm going in.'

She picked up the phone and dialed.

'Gargoyle bitch.'

Feeling a rush of blood, adrenaline, demonic spunk, whatever, to his head, Yosh swatted the phone out of her grip and walked backwards towards the door. Just as he was reaching for the handle, the whole thing swung open, so fast that it almost smacked him in the face, his swerving skills managing to save him at the last millisecond.

He didn't see much of the three people who came rushing out, only their backs, but he could make out that one was a woman and another was being propped up by the armpits as if he were drunk or unconscious or-...

Ignoring the receptionist yelling in his ear, Yosh trailed out after them, catching up outside the entrance of the building.

He could see them all now, or their side profiles at least.

The woman was distinctively tall, at least five ten, as broad as a builder, while the other guy was even taller and...had a huge head, dark skin...wait, was he Indonesian? He really did look it. Or definitely South-East Asian at least.

As for the other one, the guy in the middle, the one being carried...*keuso*, he knew that face. The little wretch was trying to-...trying to do *something*, escape somehow. Via that forever thing. A lobotomy. Flight or fucking flight.

The three science costumes headed down a path and over a grassy knoll, so ensconced in their little drama that they didn't bother to look back or slow down.

'You're not going anywhere, *kasu*,' Yosh mumbled, picking up their trail.

+++

The fake South-East Asian scientist and the woman who looked like Fujii Mina dragged a vacant-looking Kentaro into the car park and, after rapid scanning all the vehicles, over to a red Honda on the far side.

Yosh kept close, creating and trashing about a thousand different ambush strategies in his head.

If I rush the South-East Asian guy, put him down...I can grab Keni and run. Problems?

Nothing huge. The woman won't do anything, doesn't matter how broad she is, and the South-East Asian guy has to back down if I pull out the knife. Gah, it's not Shingen standard, but it'll do. Only thing is, what if the South-East Asian guy doesn't go down? He's pretty big, broader than me, about the same height...

Oblivious to the scheming going on nearby, the fake South-East Asian scientist opened the back door and pushed Kentaro in. The Fujii Mina lookalike was already in the driver's seat, both hands on the wheel.

Kuso, they're leaving...

Yosh forgot about strategy formulation and ran over, asking them straight out what the hell they were doing.

The fake South-East Asian scientist turned, languid as a Shinto koala, giving Yosh the chance to realise that he was even bigger close-up. 'What's with the proximity, brother?'

Yosh stared at the man's chest, picturing rabid wrestlers, walnuts being cracked, and decided against using the adopted brother story again. There was no point, this guy wouldn't buy it.

'He's my friend, *teme*. I was waiting outside, over there.' Yosh pointed somewhere behind him, a bit of concrete with other students' cigarette stubs scattered over it. 'What have you done to him? And what's all that green stuff on his head?'

'Had an accident.'

'Huh? You mean, you're taking him to the hospital?'

'The airport, brother.'

'What?'

'Damage ain't as bad as it looks.'

'Airport?'

The fake South-East Asian man shrugged and opened the passenger door. Yosh put out a vague hand to stop him.

'You got a plan there, brother?' asked the South-East Asian man, confused at the fingers on the car window.

'Wait...'

Yosh kept his hand near the door, thinking it out. He's too big, too casual. And South-East Asian, which means he might actually know how to fight. Can't get into a scuffle solo. Options? Think. Think. Okay, could use the door...trick him somehow. Drop a coin and slam his head...

'Hand's still in the way, brother.'

Yosh moved his palm off the car window, while the other hand went back inside his jacket pocket, getting a solid grip on the knife's handle.

Public place, he warned himself, way too risky. Cameras could be anywhere. And the guy's still big...big enough to break my neck if I don't put him down first time.

But if I don't do anything...

The ridiculously tall woman started the engine, calling out for her comrade to hurry up.

Kuso...kuso, kuso, kuso...

The fake South-East Asian scientist stared at Yosh then looked down at his jacket pocket. If he knew what was in there, his face did a good job of pretending not to give a shit.

'You can't take him,' mumbled Yosh.

'Friend made his own choice, brother. Deal with it.'

'No, he's-...'

'Deal. With. It.'

The fake South-East Asian man turned and shuffled into the back with Kentaro. His gorilla arm reached across and closed the door slowly, almost daring Yosh to do something.

'Wait...!' Yosh looked in through the rear window, trying with desperate darting head movements to catch Kentaro's eye. 'Hey...Keni...wake up.'

Kentaro sat like a puppet stuffed with concrete, green goo smeared all over his head, eyes blank.

'You're not running, *kasu*.' Yosh hit the glass with his fist, making the South-East Asian man laugh. 'You hear me? You're not running.'

He hit the glass again, almost hard enough to crack it.

'Keni...!' he shouted.

The car moved off, picking up speed quickly. As it went, Yosh looked once more at Kentaro and, for the first time, noticed a small plaster buried within all the green shit.

What the-...a plaster. *Kuso*, they cut him? Lobotomised? What the hell was he looking so blank for?

There were no answers.

Only fumes.

In the distance, the car became toy-sized then disappeared completely, leaving Yosh alone outside the Faculty of Science with no debt collected, no games, and no one to cut with the knife growing weeds in his jacket pocket.

In old 20th century noir, it would've started to rain.

Here, the sun was out.

'Fucking students,' Yosh muttered, lighting up another cigarette with a slightly shaky hand, then looking back at the entrance to the Science Department. 'Fucking robot secretary. Cyborg witch. Better have an address.'

CHAPTER 15

TRITON NO TAIKUTSU

The man who looked like a young Nick Stahl sat close to Tarkovskyan on a rocky outcrop [not unlike a patio], surrounded by endless acres of nitrogen ice, staring up at the gigantic, bluer than blue warden Neptune looming above, thinking out the words *warden uncle*, then *warden aunty*, then *Stasi overseer thing*, then infinite fucking blue uncle Stasi over aunty seeing nothing but same kid moon wasn't even from there just crashed in one millennia and

blue uncle bobbed there and took it

blue aunty bob

blue Stasi overcount bob

bluuuuueeeeeaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah

He held up a fingertip, prodding impotently at the smallest gas giant.

Directly in front of him was a chessboard on a plastic table, a half-slouched human player on the other side, but he didn't seem interested in either.

Neptune vs chess?

Only one of these had ever invited him to kill himself...even if it was a failed attempt. Cut. Wrong choice of words. A thwarted attempt, that was more accurate. Thwarted by his purple holo-babysitter.

Ah, those first hundred...the velvet years.

He stretched out a human hand, pushing it slowly towards the forcefield a metre beyond the table. Those almost imperceptible flecks of blue were the only things protecting him - and his chess opponent - from almost instantaneous death. At the beginning, when Assta had first told him he was stuck on this moon, he would make a habit of wearing a helmet outside, even within the perimeter, and avoid the nitrogen ice on the surface at all costs. Didn't want to do anything stupid like die before the rescue ship came. That was the idea. Now, he couldn't even remember where the helmets were kept. Or what they looked like.

'Grey patches...' he muttered, fixing his eyes back on the table.

The player opposite didn't respond.

'Pointless. Unreliable.'

A plume of nitrogen gas erupted nearby, the dust expelled clashing with the forcefield and turning the blue flecks frantic. Auxiliary dust trickled down at a sedate pace, *why* if he felt like attaching personality to the thing, and settled on the rocky slope beyond the perimeter.

The man who looked like a young Nick Stahl shunned the spectacle and instead arched his neck towards the black ceiling above. 'Up there, Keitho...that's where the real fucking madness is. Oort Cloud. Alpha Centauri. Helix Nebula. Da'ba Da'baka. The million other places she never bothers to tell me about.'

He stopped scanning and came back for the seven hundredth time to the chessboard. His eyes scrutinized the smudged and scuffed *Roscosmos* costume of the player opposite, head tilted to make it more professorial, but it didn't seem to register that he was staring at a corpse.

'Still your move, Childs.'

No answer.

'Keitho?'

Nothing.

'You still sucking in power over there?'

Nothing.

The man who looked like a young Nick Stahl waited a few seconds then moved over to the body of his opponent. Keith David, ancient and tall, the glass of

his replica cosmonaut helmet cracked, the flesh on his face a bit grey but generally well-preserved.

‘Purple finally cut you off, comrade.’

No response.

‘Mid-game too.’

Whistling off-key, he turned and studied the path back to base. About two hundred metres, not too far. Unless you had a two hundred-odd pound corpse to carry.

‘Have to leave you here for a while, Keitho. Get the purple assist, fly you over to the cemetery. You know the routine.’

In the distance, seemingly dug into the side of the mountain, a beacon started to emit staggered bursts of fluorescent purple light.

‘Ah, how predictable. Meal time.’

The man who looked like a young Nick Stahl put a hand on Keith David’s shoulder and accidentally caused his head to slump to the side. Luckily, the neck bones were still composed enough to stop it toppling off.

‘Be back in an hour. No cheating while I’m gone.’

Leaving his chair pulled out from the plastic table, the man who looked like a young Nick Stahl started off along the path that he could’ve walked with his eyes cut out. Base to View Point 2. View Point 2 to Base. For a human, it would’ve been a brisk, diverting stroll, but for an alien with the talents he sometimes had, it was pure tedium. Not only the fact that he could’ve completed the trip in seconds with purple-assist, but the way he had no choice but to walk like this. Traipsing about on Earth with the potential to go fast, okay, fine, but not being physically able to, at all...*that*...was completely enervating.

Ironically, all his internal moaning killed most of the travel time and pretty soon he was heading through the tetryon protection field and down the KAV-tunnel into what humans would’ve called a hotel lobby.

As usual, Assta had adjusted the colour of the walls, this time to fern green, and kept the dreg-holograms active in the seating area. Apparently, they stayed

operational even when he wasn't there, the logic being that it would give them unique experiences to relay back to him when they conversed again.

Of course, it was ropey logic – what possible experiences could a dreg-hologram have sitting in the exact same place all the time, interacting solely with other dreg-holograms? – but there wasn't much he could do about it. Assta was manager, mother and psycho-therapist all in one. And physician too.

'Neck, please,' said the tall human woman with purple eyes, his eternal nurse Assta, materialising seemingly out of the floor with a giant syringe in her hand.

'Can I get a drink first?'

'Neck then drink.'

The man who looked like a young Nick Stahl audibly sighed and pulled down his collar. The giant syringe was in and out before he knew it. Like a contract being stamped.

'Now you may get a drink.'

'Fantastic.'

'I recommend Asaluchan Tea.'

'Noted.'

He walked over to the seating area and waved his hand through the stream of hazy particles in the wall nearby. Almost instantly a glass of blue liquid materialized on the table in front of him.

'Pretty chilly outside,' said one of the dreg-holograms, a replica of what Assta told him had been a great adventurer from one of the Earth coloniser nations.

He mumbled, 'not with the containment field up,' and sipped his drink.

The dreg-hologram nodded and returned to their book. *Planet Gaarr* // Barbara Kingjoy. Great, garbage sci-fi, written by a human know-nothing-say-everything.

'That is not Asaluchan Tea,' said Assta, hovering behind his seat.

'I felt like something sparkier.'

The tall hologram dipped her head, the purple eyes darkening slightly as she examined the contents of his glass. 'If you are bored, the battle room can be initiated.'

'Veto.'

‘The ball bouncing room.’

‘Even more veto.’

‘The spirit box.’

‘Assta...’

A flickering of molecules around the forehead and throat, followed by a typically electronic *hmm*. ‘Your body language indicates that you are 7% away from moderate depression. Perhaps sex with a belligerent figure from human history would be beneficial?’

‘Atilla the Hun again?’

‘There are seven thousand, semi-realistic character profiles in our database, male and female, seventy-three intersex, two hundred-and-eight non-binary.’

‘I know, I know. You don’t have to tell me every time.’

‘It is in my programming.’

‘I know that too.’

Assta ceased hovering and decided to kneel down by the arm of his chair. Modulating her tone to a whisper, she asked if he was still upset about the Bosnian situation.

‘That was two years ago.’

‘Trauma is both dogged and persistent.’

‘I’m not traumatized. I murdered all of them.’

‘But you did not enjoy it.’

‘It was okay.’

‘Your tone and facial expression suggests you are lying.’

The man who looked like a young Nick Stahl shifted in his seat and almost knocked the glass over in the process. ‘In truth, I’ve been thinking about that Japanese boy.’

‘That is not a recommended target.’

‘I checked up on him last night. Or two nights ago. Or last week, whenever it was. He went through with the operation.’

Assta straightened up, eyes flickering like the forcefield flecks.

‘See, you didn’t predict that, did you?’

‘Checking.’

‘Don’t bother, I’ve already made up my mind. I’m going to pay him a visit.’

‘Confirmed. He is currently on his way to Liverpool, North Britain.’

‘Glad you approve.’

‘Our approval is irrelevant. We are merely advisors.’

‘And bodyguards and mothers and doctors and psychologists and all the rest of it.’ He pushed himself back onto his feet and stretched his arms right through the grey, wraith-like, dreg-holographic head immediately behind him. ‘I’ll be in the Steam Lab if you need me.’

‘There is a problem. The boy’s face is still Japanese.’

‘What?’

‘The operation was flawed. His mind is now an erratic composite of two distinct personalities. In addition to this, his face remains unchanged.’

‘Even better.’

‘It will be a frustrating experience if you interact with him.’

‘Exhilarating more like.’

‘We suggest that you delay contact for six months. Allow the two personalities to settle.’

‘Suggestion noted.’

The man who looked like a young Nick Stahl patted Assta on the head like a moon koala then, whistling an old Quetta melody, moved off to the arch on the other side of the room. Before long, he was in another tunnel, spiraling downwards to the Steam Lab. To get him in the mood, tendrils of purple mist crept out of the vents and a pulsating beat accompanied him all the way to the DEV-hatch of the main pod.

Climbing inside, he was about to pull down the lid when Assta appeared again and asked if this was really the right thing for him to do at this time.

‘Psychologically? Oh yeah.’

‘Another disappointment could fracture your psyche and mold you into a recluse, which would be detrimental in the event of rescue.’

‘That infamous rescue ship, four hundred years in the making.’

‘Sarcasm is unwarranted. There are many plausible explanations for why the ship has taken so long to arrive.’

‘Forget it, Assta. I’m okay. I feel fine.’

‘Temporarily, that is correct.’

‘Besides, if my psyche does fracture or crack or whatever, you’ll be here to stop me doing anything stupid. Right?’

‘We can only prevent telegraphed suicide attempts.’

‘And you can read me like a recipe book. Now, if you’ll let me get this lid down, I’ve got a new friend to make.’

Assta’s eyes buffered and a second later her whole form disassembled.

Inside the pod, things became purple.

Mist seeped in from outside and slithered slowly back out again, and whatever happened inside, happened in silence, without screams or grunts or *fuck off you poddy cunt mist fuck*. Finally, a beeping sound came from the side and the hatch opened again.

A pair of purple eyes emerged first, followed by the body-construct housing them. It still resembled Nick Stahl, only now it was a few inches taller, broader framed, more muscular.

Floating out from the pod, Nick rose up through a hole that opened automatically in the ceiling, then turned right and drifted through another tunnel. This one appeared to be completely blank, undesignated, and was soon left behind as Nick continued out of the base and away from the mountain and then, after half a minute of drifting, down onto an isolated rock clearing with around seventy-odd gravestones dotted about.

A few nitrogen plumes later, the corpse of Keith David floated down like a curious cloud-dog and settled itself into a freshly dug grave.

Half a second after that, a gravestone appeared, with the personalized message: *A good friend for a good while.*

The man who looked like a taller Nick Stahl gave unbroken attention physically and psychically to his good friend’s corpse, picturing a younger Keith with

his nose bridge wrinkled in disgust as the dirt collapsed in from the side, slowly filling the whole grave.

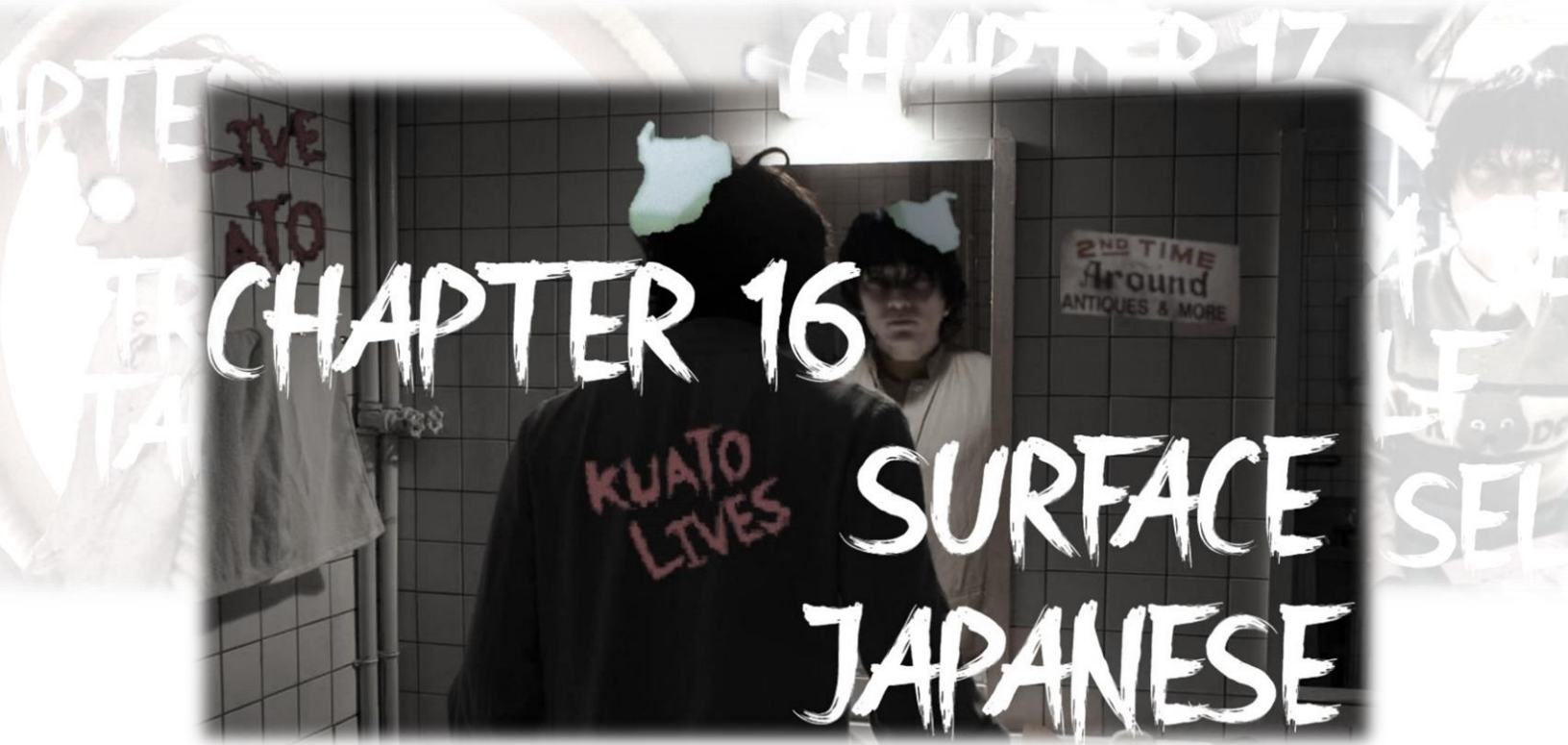
When it was done, he poked a finger into his temple as his own version of a salute then launched himself at a slight skewed angle back up into the air. Dodging a plume of sublimating nitrogen ice, he edged back inside the perimeter and skimmed over to a small alcove dug into the rocks above the base. It was well-lit with hanging strips of fluorescent purple hanging from the walls, and empty except for the five totems laid out in a semi-circle deeper inside. Folding arms across his chest, he uttered the word *activate* in his native language then closed his eyes as a pale bank of purple mist coalesced in the air before him, adding *Iceland* quickly when it started slithering forward.

As usual, full absorption took forty-three seconds.

Another two seconds after that...gone.

Mist *and* alien.

Outside, beyond the cave, Triton and the base continued on like every other Thursday – nitrogen ice, helium haze, sudden dust plumes, holo-gossip - barely noticing a thing.



Stumbled dazed into the final chamber, gun in hand, ready to shoot anything that looked like it might shut this nightmare Tsukamoto-Scape down.

Topography was huge, elaborate, colourful, industrial dank.

Around five hundred cloning pods, all empty except one.

I walked towards it, gun elevated.

Glass of the pod was covered in condensation. Shape of a face edged through, but it was impossible to tell who it belonged to.

Behind me, a gun-man appeared.

Kuso, it was him, COPENHAGEN.

'Damn you, Keni,' he slurred, bits of shredded ice hanging off his forehead. 'You've really fucked up my plans here.'

'And I'm gonna fuck them up even more.'

'Not this time.'

Copenhagen raised his gun, but I knew from the news-types he'd always had trouble with his aim. Everything else in life, ultra decisive, except when he fires a gun.

I shot blindly, clipping the space tycoon on the shoulder.

Shot him again, sending him backwards through some pipes and badly-constructed electrical equipment.

Copenhagen landed hard, wheezed, began his death spiral.

I swaggered over, told him he'd been shot.

'Yeah.' Gargled blood. 'Your fault my gun was faulty?'

'Nope.'

'God...fucking props. Takes me back to my theatre days. I did Henry once, you

know?'

'What?'

'Henry the...wah, one of the numbers. Fourth maybe. Played him as a cripple, very

bold.'

'No idea what you're saying, despot.'

'Jesus of Kensington...'

'Henry who?'

'Fuck you, bricklayer.'

Copenhagen spluttered, died.

I went back over to the final cloning pod, but it was too late. Someone or something

was coming out.

'You...!' I mumbled.

Standing in front of me, clutching a manuscript, was a grey and naked Tsukubashi.

'Don't shoot, I'm a poet,' he said, holding up the pages.

'Irrelevant.'

'Wait, just-...'

Tsukubashi tried to hand the manuscript over, but I swatted it away and shot the

Ondōan lover in the cheek.

He fell, bleeding puddles onto his manuscript.

'You gonna say something too?' I asked.

'Yes.'

I waited, rolling up the manuscript and lighting the tip.

'Man, I've got....kids to feed.'

'Let them get their own fucking food.'

'You cruel bast-...'

'Die, hippy.'

Tsukubashi spluttered, died.

I smoked the remaining pages of *Within The Rabbit Hole* and sat down on a swivel chair that I was pretty sure hadn't been there two minutes ago.

When I blinked, another pod opened.

And another.

And another.

BOOM

A voice from above.

'Aarrgh.'

I looked up.

Shibasaki Kou sliding down a cable from above, an AK-Something slung over her shoulder, muzzle firing, mouth raging, eyes...

BOOM

Everything turned orange.

Military grey.

Greyish.

Boom

...

Boom

...

Boom

...

...

Shibasaki Kou flickered, lost the kill-tech, morphed into a giant red alarm clock.

Then a smaller clock.

Then a phone.

Ah.

I opened one eye and stared at the numbers.

Nothing happened.

I blinked and tried again.

Eight three eight.

Two minutes until it started ringing again.

I picked it up and brought it closer to my face, finally getting an idea as to how to turn the thing off. The beeping started up again and died almost immediately as I pressed the button.

Half eight. One of the week days. Not weekend. Okay. Manageable.

I threw the covers off one of my legs and lay there, considering turning over and pushing against the mattress.

I didn't.

There was a strange idea in my head...that I should watch *Beyond The Rabbit Hole* or one of the *Alien* filmns.

Then a question: why is the alien in *Alien* black?

Huh?

I looked around the room, trying to anchor myself in some semblance of reality. The eye of Katolon looked back at me from the far wall. For a second, I couldn't read the letters around it...

Kin-gu-oh-fu-da-re-do-rin-gu.

King Of The Red Ring.

What...

I looked at the books on the shelf and the same thing happened again.

Hai - nu - lai - nu.

Heinlein.

Ra - yu - Bu - ra- du - be - ri.

Ray Bradbury.

For some reason, English didn't come out as easy as it usually did.

I got up and tried reading the covers of the old VR-home games. After a few seconds of intensive eye straining, things phased back in, became normal again.

Just to confirm, I picked up a pack with a veiny eyeball on its sleeve.

Automatic Assassin - Marc Horne.

Normal.

Putting down the game, I rubbed at the sides of my eyes.

It was nothing...probably just tired.

I climbed back into bed and pulled the duvet over my face.

Another half hour, that'll fix it.

+++

An hour and a half later, I switched back on.

Yawned, stretched out my legs, arms, rolled off the bed in fourteen separate stages, hovered for a bit then Romero-walked to the bathroom. The floor was wet, probably from Charlie taking a shower and not pulling the curtain across properly [for the five hundredth time].

Silly bint, never learns.

Picking up the purple toothbrush, I dabbed on some paste and started brushing. Far as I could remember there was no college today...though I wasn't a hundred per cent sure.

Come to think of it...what day was it?

Tuesday?

And yesterday...was I at the-....

I stared at the taps while brushing, wondering what I'd done the night before. Actually, more than that...what had I done the last week or so?

A Chinese man popped into my head, holding one of those box knives.

Huh?

I looked up at the mirror and he was there too.

Wah...

The toothbrush dropped and my head flipped right, neck almost snapping the bone as I scanned like a lunatic for the Chinese man brushing his teeth with my toothbrush in my bathroom.

Nothing. Empty.

There was no one else there.

But...

What...how...

It couldn't-...

I was just-...

Kuso.

Fuck.

There was a Chinese man in my house, who could move at lightning speed.

No, worse.

There was a Chinese man ghost who'd died...been killed, murdered, before we'd moved in, and he was-...

No, different...there was some kind of portal open between Liverpool and China through which the two of us could observe each other.

Yes, one of those.

Had to be.

Bending down to pick up the toothbrush, I came back up slowly and washed the bristles under the tap before storing up enough resolve to look in the mirror again.

No.

Kuso.

He was still there. Face moving in sync with mine. Expression exactly the same...or what I thought my expression would be based on-...

Fuck.

I turned.

There was no-one behind me.

I spun back, blinking like a schizophrenic AH-Bot.

Not there, not there, not there...

Blinking stopped and squinting began.

No.

Not real.

The mirror wasn't doing what I wanted it to.

It was...

The face looking back...

It was me.

I could feel it, the essence of it, the movements.

Definitely me.

Fuck.

Fucking *kenso*.

+++

I went downstairs, feeling the skin of my cheeks as I went.

It's a faulty mirror, I thought. Has to be.

Yet, on the flip side, there are some things in my head that seem a bit...

No, not real.

I'm Scouse...Mark...this is impossible.

The others will prove it.

+++

They were all in the kitchen, which was also the living room, pretending not to watch TV. It was strange, it had always seemed small before, but now, walking in like this, it seemed gigantic.

Anyway, there they all were.

Dad, *Pet Sematary 2* t-shirt. Mum, Slazenger jacket. Billy, skinhead, nonsense Urdu tattoo, Charlie, chubby legs, hair grubby-wild like a cave troll.

It was her that saw me first, coupled with a manic shriek.

Billy couldn't open his mouth.

'Who the fuck are you?' Dad said, too shocked to make it a shout.

Mum was too busy watching something on GENTE+, offering a loosely muttered, 'what?'

'Dad...Mum, wait-...' My hands went up instinctively in the surrender pose. 'I swear, I don't know what this is. Really, I was just brushing my teeth and I look up and-...in the mirror, right there, this face. Like this. Staring back at me and just-...'

Something hit me on the head before I could add *smiling*.

And the next line.

HELP ME PLEASE.

+++

I woke up tied to my favourite chair.

Dad was standing rigid as fuck in front of me, eyes mammoth, a mop handle gripped tight in his non-fighting hand.

'Don't know how you got here, but you better tell us right now what you've done with our Mark.'

I looked around the room. Mum, Charlie, Billy, they all had a weapon of some sort.

'Dad...listen...'

'Do I look like your fucking dad?' he yelled back at me.

My mouth stayed open, but I had forgotten how to spit out words. Instead, I did a more detailed survey of the living room, cataloguing the weapon types. Billy, for some reason, was wielding the detachable head and neck part of the vacuum cleaner. Charlie had a frying pan. And Mum was-...

'Where's Mark, you little thief?'

The mophead flew in front of my face, forcing a reflex *WAH*.

'Why are you here?'

'No, Dad...it's me. I'm Mark. But this face, it's-...I don't know, I need help...need you guys to-...'

A swift backhand from Mum, clipping me with her fingernail. In the other hand was a plug and wire combo...gripped like a fucking lasso.

'Fuck...that hurt.'

'Shut up, you little...'

'My cheek.'

'...thing.'

+++

After asking me a hundred or so times where Mark was, their weapon arms finally got tired and they were forced to sit down. 'Okay,' started Dad, perched on the arm of the sofa, 'if you're really Mark like you say you are...which you're clearly not...there's some things you should know about.'

'Yeah, exactly...that's what I've been trying to-...'

'Shut up.' Dad stood up again, pointing the handle part of the mop at me.

'We ask questions, you answer. If they're not good, we call the koban. Got it?'

My brain told me it was fine, dad didn't even know where the koban was, so I tried out one of those old sitcom sighs and nodded.

'Okay then...'

+++

Despite my compliance, plus a ten minute break to make a quick cup of tea, the weapons stayed firmly in hand and the interrogation started precisely where I suspected it would, with them asking my date of birth.

'December 29th, 2015,' I replied, without blink or stutter.

Dad: Could've looked that up. We want details...what time...which hospital, stuff like that...

'Okay. Hospital...the Royal Liverpool...that's easy. Other stuff...err, the time...okay, I wasn't there, at that moment, obviously, but I remember you said...Mum...you told me I'd come early. Eleven at night, I think. And I cried when I came out.'

Counterpoint [from Mum] – Babies always cry.

'Yeah, I know, but that's what you said. Not my fault it's generic. I mean, *you cried, Mark*, that's literally what you said.'

Prompt [from Dad] – what else?

'More? I don't know. It was caesarian? Somehow I flipped over and the doctor said it couldn't happen naturally, I needed help.'

Concession [from Dad] – yeah, that is true.

Prompt [from Mum] – More.

'Okay, what else...what else...wait, I know...you said I was an accident. Right? You didn't plan for me, it just happened and...and you didn't wanna get rid of me, even though I was the third and you guys didn't really have the money...I mean, at that time, pre-communal, before the local clinics and...and you said Charlie was an accident too, she wasn't a plan...planned...but you didn't know what else to do so...'

Incredulity [from Charlie, sister] – You don't know that. How can you...how the fuck do you know that?

'Charlie, come on...it's me, Mark.'

Denial [from Charlie] – No, you're not...it's not you, you're lying.

Prompt [from Mum] – More.

Echo [from Charlie] – Fucking lying.

Follow-up prompt [Mum] – Something from your childhood. School life.

Dad - And not typical things. Tell us something bad or weird that happened.

'You want the bad parts? Okay, the worst one, off the top of my head. I got picked on in school...primary school...those kids, when I was eight and nine, remember, Mum? They used to have wrestling matches in the yard corner, and they forced me into it, that match with the big kid...Louse...Andrew Leece...he smacked my head against the ground and threw me over the railings. I was in hospital for two weeks, and Louse...he had to write me a card, a get well card...remember?'

Concession [from Billy, brother] – Fuck, Louse. I remember him. That kid was a cunt.

Prompt [from Mum] – Something earlier, something only you would know.

'Okay, okay...earlier. Right. When I was five, when we first moved here, they put me in the wrong class at school...a whole year ahead...and the work was

still too easy. Remember? They let me draw computerr game levels instead of the normal stuff...and I brought them all home, and you said...'

Counter-point [from Dad] – I don't remember that.

'Yeah cos I never showed them to you. You were away, at a boat regatta or something...but Mum, I showed them to you, and you said I wouldn't design computerr games when I was older, I would be something better, an artist or a writer...you said I was a genius.'

Concession [from Mum] – Yes. Once. But...

Whine [from Charlie] – you called him a genius? HIM?

Acceptance [from Billy] – well, he is smarter than us. Don't know about genius though.

'I'm not smarter, guys. Or a genius. I'm not anything.'

Joke [from Billy] – Yeah, you are. You're Chinese, mate.

Enquiry [from Dad] – but if you're really Mark then...what's happened?
Why do you have this...

'Face? I don't know. I mean, it wasn't like this yesterday...right?'

Response [from Billy and Dad] – No...no...

'So, it's happened today, whatever it is. Or last night maybe.'

Enquiry [from Dad] – Is there anything else different?

'Physically? I don't know, I don't think so. I might be a little taller...'

Enquiry [from Billy] – You speak Chinese or...?

'No. Zero. But...actually, I think I might be Japanese. The face.'

Enquiry [from Dad] – how do you know?

'I don't. It's just something inside, an instinct...and it's saying, *Japanese*.'

Silence and deliberation.

'Can you untie me now?'

Further deliberation.

Protest [from Charlie, overheard] – No, he's lying...his face, it's not fucking Mark. Look at it...look. He's lying to us.

Rebuttal [from Dad] – but he's got all the right answers, love.

Additional [from Billy] – It's definitely him, sis. Don't know how, but it is.

Threat [from Charlie] – You can't, he's lying, he's a fucking-...look at him, he's a thing pretending to be Chinese. We can't let it loose, it'll do something to us.

Dad: Charlie...

Charlie: No. Fuck off. I'm not living with it, no way, I swear I'll-...I swear to fucking God, you untie him and I'll go, I'll move out.

Charlie runs out of the living room and footsteps are heard on the stairs.

Shout [from Mum] – Charlie, love...

'Mum, I'm sorry...'

Mum: Shut up, Mar-...you...whoever you are. Just shut up. Let us think.

They group into a circle again and talk.

Decision [from Dad] – Son, I'm not sure what's going on here, but we're gonna run with our gut...or my gut...and untie you. But if we find out you're lying...

Additional [from Billy] – Just don't be lying, kid. Alright?

I nodded as much as my neck would allow.

From my Stasi interrogation seat.

Previously my favourite chair.

Fucking lying...

Kuso.



Dad put down the mop and untied me.

Billy threw his weapon on the sofa and trudged upstairs to get ready for work. As usual, he moaned as he went, saying that I owed him whatever the adventurists cut from his wage for being late.

‘That’s what you get for not working local.’

‘Oh, did they relocate your gym then?’

‘Fuck off, that’s different.’

‘Ha, typical shit comeback, definitely our Mark.’

He was right, but by the time I’d come up with a better one, he was already up the stairs. Well, plus point, at least he believed me now.

Mum sat down and stared at the linoleum tiles, the plug and wire thing still fairly tight in her hands. I stayed distant, on my hostage chair, even though I really wanted to stand up and move my legs again.

Dad stayed in front of me, like an old movie cut-out, eventually placing a fat hand on my shoulder. I looked at the knuckles, the wedding ring, then went back up and saw a Japanese man, middle-aged, fierce, glaring down as if his thoughts would set my face on fire.

I blinked.

The Japanese man was gone. It was dad again, stroking the face of the evil cop dad from *Pet Sematary 2*.

'What's going on, son?'

'I don't know. Really.'

'Do you remember anything about last night? What time you slept? Any strange noises?'

'No, nothing. Except...I think I went out. At some point.'

'Yeah, I remember that part. But we didn't hear you come back in, your mum or me. Where were you?'

'Not sure...just out...drinking maybe. I don't know.'

'But you did come back...'

'I must've, yeah. But when...'

'What about day-time? The afternoon? Anything weird happen?'

'Dad, I don't know. It's-...there's nothing. No places, people...I can't remember anything.'

He shrugged, tightened his grip on my shoulder, told me we'd figure it all out soon enough then sat down properly on the sofa. There were no details on how exactly it would all be figured out. Just that it would be. Via the universe. The hand of a clumsy god. Muons and up quarks. Weird science. Something.

Five minutes later, I stood up and told him I better go and get ready for college.

'Son, wait...'

'I have to, it's almost twelve.'

'No, no, think about it. You're Japanese now...you can explain it to us, barely, but to them? Your classmates? The professors?'

'But my classes, I'll fall behind.'

'Mark...'

He stood up and took my sleeve, guided us into the second, makeshift living room at the front that we hardly ever used, and then told me in a hushed tone that it was probably best not to go out for a few days.

'But...why not? I look Japanese, there's no way to get rid of it, so...might as well just try and get on with things.'

'That's your frustration talking. And I understand, but...'

'No, you don't.'

'...if you try and-...okay, you're right, I don't understand. But let's just try and slow things down a bit, okay? If you turned Japanese overnight, just like that, then there's a chance that tomorrow morning you might change back again. With a bit of luck, we could get through all this without anyone else finding out.'

'We...'

'You just have to sit tight and wait,' he added, looking out the window at the line of artisan repair shops-stroke-cafes across the road.

'But the classes...'

'It's only for a few days.'

'I know, but...I'll be bored if I stay here.'

He pointed outside, at *LOGO-X Bicycle Repair + Coffee*, at the pavement, at the roof garden higher up, and asked how many Japanese people I could see walking around this street.

'But I'm Mark...I'm not really Japanese...'

'That's not what your face says.'

'...and I can prove it anyway.'

'Can you?'

'Of course, like I just proved it to you and the others.'

Dad did the inevitable, sighed. 'Yes. Because we're family, son.'

'What do you mean?'

'You think any of our neighbours have the same concern for you that we do? Or your friends for that matter?'

'My friends?'

He shook his head, a little exaggerated. 'Truth is...we want to believe you because we love you. They might not, because they don't.'

'What? My friends since school don't like me?'

'Yes, they like you, of course they do, they're your friends, but *like* is not enough. To them, you'll just be a stranger coming up to them with a Japanese face, saying very bizarre things.'

'Well, they won't attack me with a mop. I know that much.'

'Mark...'

'Or tie me to a chair.'

'...this isn't a joke.'

'Or keep me locked up here.'

He let out a long, tired breath and looked at my shoes, the green paint stain on the wooden floor. 'Sorry, son, but I'm gonna have to put my foot down on this. We just can't afford to take the risk. Not until we know more about what's happening to you.'

I looked back at him, still thinking, yeah, friends are the problem, you assaulted me and tied me to a chair. Seemingly reading my thoughts, he stayed with the stain.

'You really don't believe me, do you?'

'What?'

'Your eyes are stuck on the floor.'

'Nonsense.' He looked up, fixed a target on my forehead. 'There was some dirt down there. I've been looking you in the eye for the last ten minutes.'

'No, not just now, you looked down before, too. And out the window. Psychologically that means you don't believe me.'

'Mark...'

'Ha, Mark...'

He grabbed my arms and held them tight. 'Son, listen to me. I know you're not Japanese. I know you're still our Mark. We just have to wait, that's all. That's all I'm saying, not anything else. Just wait to see what happens next. Okay?'

It was hard to fully believe him...anyone could hold someone's arms and look vaguely sincere...but I gave out a robotic *okay* anyway.

Satisfied, he patted me on the shoulder and said we could go back into the living room, stick some *Doctor Who* on.

Half-smiling, I said, 'no thanks, I'm gonna go upstairs, lie down for a bit.'

'Okay, son.'

I didn't tell him I had no idea who or what *Doctor Who* was.

+++

Other discrepancies hidden from the family [a small list]...

- *Pluto 2280*, a VR game not due out for months that I somehow knew scenes of

-The word *Jiyugaoka*, VR centres instead of plazas

-The word *Tsunashima*

-Japanese girl in a wet towel

-Japanese guy in a shopp, a knife on the counter

-A river not in Liverpool

-Japanese man in a white coat, Japanese woman, South-East Asian guy with a Jamaican accent

-Japanese brother, not Billy

-Japanese child, walking to a lighthouse on Sado Island

-In school, struggling to say *vehicle* in English

-Why is the alien from *Alien* black?

+

I sat on the same large bed as before, a double, in *my* bedroom, staring at the *Moon Factory 7* poster on the wall opposite.

It was very strange, these things in my head. So strange that I'd written some notes down in a *Blank Koala* notepad I couldn't remember buying.

So far, the notepad had two pages of ideas and theories of why I was who I thought I was, and how it could be possible to remember two different things around the same age, plus the plausible mechanics of being able to remember something one second then blink and not remember it the next.

The first thing written down was a comparison.

My real memories

- Put a year ahead at school.
- Bullied – eight, nine and thirteen.
- Trips to Cornwall [7 y.o.], Devon [9 y.o.], Edinburgh [12 y.o.], Alton Towers [14 + 16 y.o.]
- What else?
- Entered junior mastermind at school at nine, runner up at ten.
- Broke ankle jumping off roof at 12.
- Did badly in GCSE, scraped some A-levels, went to college...
- Lost virginity to...oh Jesus...skip that.
- Had sex in freezing cold Sefton Park with a girl called Efua, thought my dick was gonna drop off.
- Work at the gym near the Catholic Church, in the adventurist sector.

Someone else's Japanese memories

- In top three of all students at primary.
 - Bullied smaller kid at twelve and thirteen. What happened to him?
- Trips to Hiroshima [7 y.o.], Sado Island [11 y.o.], Kyushu tour [12 y.o.], Osaka/ Nara/ Kyoto [14, 15 +16], Taipei [17y.o.]
 - Fights with three other kids at secondary. Got sucker hit by a rock, but nothing broken.
- Student at university, but didn't go to lectures...patched into a lot of space VR, stayed up late
 - had rough sex in disabled toilets with a girl called Aya
 - sat on bed with a muscular guy, a knife lying on the floor

It didn't make any kind of sense, at least none that I knew of.

Both sets of memories seemed one hundred per cent true, yet at the same time, unfamiliar somehow, incomplete, like I'd half lived them. Drifted through them in a real-world immersion haze. But that was bullshit, how could my memories be unfamiliar? I wasn't Japanese, I was British...Scouse. All that Japanese stuff was someone else's shit not mine because...cos nothing else made any kind of logical sense. I mean, how could I have half lived my own life? How could I not be the person I knew for a fact I really was?

I stared at the *Akira* poster on the wall to the left, imagined myself riding a jet bike in future Tokyo, then went back to the notes.

The rest of the paper was filled with plans on what to do next. *Wait* was the most obvious one, but it was inactive. In fact, I had actually written down a brief analysis disputing it:

'...if the original face change to Japanese was an active change then the idea that a re-active change could happen just as readily is illogical. To act can be done swiftly, to react would take longer. Example, a broken bone – to break requires a second, to heal requires weeks or months. Does this apply to face changes? Possibly. Whoever changed my face might've prepared a template of the desired Japanese face therefore giving them something to work towards. Problem – to affect a reverse change back to the original face, my face, they would had to have kept the template of the original. If they hadn't then...

Unless I just gave them a photograph...would that work?'

Other plans included going to college and explaining to the lecturers, simply, that I was the Japanese friend of myself, Mark, and my real self was sick at home and would it be possible for me, the Japanese friend, to continue in his place and bring back the notes from lectures?

It wasn't too far-fetched. I mean, it wasn't like there were no Japanese people in Liverpool at all. I think there was even one on my course.

But would they allow it?

Another plan was going to the guys I knew at the gym, people who knew other people, the kind of people who might've been responsible for doing this to me,

and asking them what they knew. If I could corner the twat who did this, I could get him to change me back...

But would he? If he did it in the first place then he must've had a reason. Money? A Japanese holo-girl? Or maybe it was coercion. They had someone he loved and if he didn't do this to me, that person would get hurt.

I tapped the back of the notepad, ignoring the lunatic howling like a wolf on the street outside.

The final plan was a bit loose...just an idea to go down Bold Street or Matthew Street and hit some of the barrs, see what kind of action a Japanese face could get. I mean, looking at it in the mirror, objectively, it was probably better than the old face...

But girls here didn't like Asian guys...did they?

Clouds hijacked the sun and the room went dark.

I closed my eyes.

Almost instantly, the sun broke free and light returned.

Easy as that.

I turned over on my side, looked at the books on the shelf under *Akira*.

Bley, Delaney, Le Guin, Chu. I went over and picked one out at random.

The Martian Chronicles by Ray Bradbury.

I started reading and after about fifty minutes got to a story about astronauts landing on the Mars surface and going to a house in the alien town, where one of the Martians takes them in, mollifies a bit, then locks them up in an insane asylum for the delusional. According to the Martian shrink, they couldn't be Earthmen, and the only alternative state was madmen.

Yeah, I thought, caustic. Must be mad.

Despite a burgeoning sense of dread and nihilism, I trundled on.

More humans, colonization, farmer riding a Martian highway. Nothing relevant or relaxing. But then I got to the end of the story and...there was something loose, tucked in; a folded-up piece of paper with *For Mark* scrawled over it.

I wasn't sure if I was the right *Mark*, but opened it anyway.

+

[A note, from Mark]

'Hi mate...

This is probably the weirdest thing I've ever had to write, and I've written sci-fi, really weird shit lol, but this is defo weirder.

Actually, I don't know if you'll find this, maybe I hid it too well...was gonna leave it on the pillow, but my mum's always in the room looking for porn holos hehe, and she would've seen it, and I can't let her know about this...

So I guess if you're reading right now then you think you're me, right? And wherever I am, I think I'm you. Don't know if that's right or not, they said all your old memories would be wiped and you'd think you were me or as close as you could be to thinking you were me, but don't know really...does that make sense? Beats me, mate, but I do know one thing...I shouldn't be writing this.

Ok, I'm rambling, but the point is I couldn't just leave cold without asking some things...and I know this is gonna confuse you, like if you really think you're me then it's really gonna fuck you up lol, sorry mate, but this is important.

Basically, the bare bones reason why I did this...I mean, why I wanted to change and be someone else...you basically, a Japanese guy...is I don't like myself. It is deeper than that, honest, but I'm writing a note, not a theory, right, so I've gotta be concise...so that's the reason. Anyway, the one thing there, or here, that I was happy about, kinda, was my writing. See, I write stories...sci-fi or fantasy, stuff like that...and I've been writing for a few years now, but never really got anywhere with it...I don't know, maybe they were just total shite lol, but they're still what I've done, and I guess they're a kind of reflection of me and what I'm about...

So, the things I wanna ask...

One, please have a look at my stuff and see what you think...it's probably useless shit, but have a look, and if you can, try and sell it somewhere...I don't know,

agents or magazines or publishers, whatever. I know, I know, why didn't I ever do it myself? Guess I just never had the guts to, right? I'm a coward, me...always too scared to do things like this, so maybe that's another reason I opted for the forever exchange thing...

Fuck, this is sounding like a suicide note haha, I really hope my Mum doesn't find this, her head will explode lol...

Another thing...not really a request, but a warning, or an apology, I don't know....but before I went for the surgery, the exchange thing [I'm writing this like an hour before I've gotta go there, so I guess it's not really the past yet haha], I quit my course at the college. Don't know if you can change it or not, but my advice is don't go back, mate, it's a shit course and you're better off trying something else. And if you're worried about something to do, you've still got the gym [sorry, it's adventurist run, sociopathic but better machines than our local one, sadly], and some money in the bank, so there's a bit of cash there for you while you figure things out. Hope you've got some cash for me in Japan, maybe a fit girlfriend too, but I'm not pinning any hopes on it...if she were that fit, you wouldn't have left hehe.

Ok, don't have much more space here...I always write way too much lol, sorry, mate. Guess I should say sorry for breaking the spell or whatever, but I just felt like it was something I had to do...the writing part of it, I mean. And please, try to do something with it, if you can...

Thanks brother...

Mark

P.S. I've been thinking...if you do read this and you have no memory of who you were before...I mean, if you really think you're Mark....then you're gonna think you're nuts. Actually, maybe you have my memory of writing this...or do they take that out? Yeah, anyway don't think about it too hard, it'll only fuck with your head.

I read it four times, each time with greater confusion. I mean, it was madness. I never wrote this. Why would I write this?

Somewhere outside, a car slammed on its brakes, and a woman screamed at the driver to get a fucking bike.

Blowing out held-in-too-long breath, I folded the note back up and hid it between pages 56 and 57 of Bradbury's Mad Martians book.

Not me.

Not important.



CHAPTER 18

HOME ALONE

[WITH THEORIES]

The next morning there was another note.

Not from the Mark simulacrum, from my family.

They said, or Dad said, that they would be away for a short while. There was a mountain they had read about in Wales and they all thought, hey, why not go and climb it.

What? I asked the note, moving on to the next part.

It was a new mountain, apparently, just got classified the other week and half of Liverpool was off to climb it.

But what about me? Didn't they want all their kids to come?

The note said they'd thought about asking me to come but I was still asleep when they left and they didn't want to wake me, and besides, with the Japanese problem, perhaps it wasn't the best idea to publicise it too much to others.

'Yeah, thanks Dad.'

I scrunched up the note and dropped it on the floor.

No publicity, right.

+++

I walked around the barren house, aimless, the Japanese Bela Tarr.

After an hour or two, I went to the bathroom and stared at the face in the mirror, willing it with every ounce of whatever passed for spirit in my stupid head to change back to normal.

It didn't.

But it was weird...looking around the room, things did seem a little lower.

I opened the cabinet and pulled out the measuring tape.

It was true, I'd felt taller since the change, but I hadn't acted on it.

Probably just poor posture anyway.

Or my mood shift affecting the way I moved.

Depressed people did tend to slouch. In films. And anime. Maybe in real life too.

I stretched the tape from the floor to my head. Admittedly, I did slump a little, but it didn't make much difference.

184cm.

That's how tall I was now.

Two and a half centimetres taller than before.

Three if I was being honest.

Putting the tape back, I hovered for a few seconds looking vaguely morose then sat down on the bathroom floor. My brain told me I should be happy, most people wanted to be taller, but I wasn't most people.

In truth, I would've done anything to be 181cm again.

+++

After sulking for another hour, then slapping myself hard in the face a few times, I ended up downstairs.

The living room seemed even larger without anyone in it.

Like a soulless display flat.

I sat down on the couch and turned on the TV. There was nothing decent to watch locally, so I switched to *GENTE* + instead. Not a good feeling to be funding the adventurists, but what could I do, they'd monopolized most of the decent sci-fi and fantasy shit, and added a limited, voyeur-only VR catalogue, so there we all were.

The machine scanned my face and, a second later, my old personalized menu materialised on screen. *Planet Dark, Void Galaxia, Moon Factory 7, Elf Serenade, Star Trek, Doctor Who*...ah, the one dad was talking about. I clicked on it, bringing to life a vintage, blue phone-box and a grinning lunatic in a coloured scarf.

+

Vague memories from *Doctor Who* [random]

-Two cleaning ladies cooking in a kitchen when one of them answers a buzzer and gets sucked into a giant cleaning machine waiting outside. It's very dark.

-Lots of swamp-men or fish-men coming out of the sea. Men in costumes...

-A man with dark hair, looks like Mandrake from *Captain Three*.

-Old country house, a man trying to make a phone call, a robot monster entering the room and attacking him. Close-up on the man, shocked.

-A young, punkish woman with red hair getting on a bus. The doctor waves goodbye. The bus explodes.

-A woman being watched by statues.

-The same woman surrounded by four statues.

-Statue terror face

+

Ah, that's what it was. *Doctor Who*.

But...yesterday, I'd never heard of it.

Now...

Kuso.

What was happening here?

Amnesia and face graft?

+++

Buffering through arbitrary bursts of *ab that one* and *what's this again*, I stayed glued to the sofa and managed four episodes straight.

The last two were about that guy who looked like Mandrake, only he didn't look like him anymore, he looked like Derek Jacobi, and then he died and looked like John Simm.

The doorbell rang.

I got up and walked into the hallway to answer it but, as my body got closer, I remembered my Japanese face. *Kuso*. Explanation season. Adjusting leftwards, I hugged the side of the wall in case whoever it was at the door was looking in through the glass panel.

But then I thought, why hide? I'm gonna answer the door anyway, they're gonna see me. And it's my fucking house.

Yeah, fuck them, and fuck their questions too.

I answered the door, slouching.

At first I thought I was looking at a delivery man, but after blinking, I realised it was Barry. Easy mistake to make. Trousers were brown, jacket was brown, and his entire body was arched backwards as if he were about to give up and leave.

When he caught sight of me, the arch became a confused full turn. He bent to the wall at the side and double checked the number.

'It's the right house, Barry.'

'Who are you?'

I thought of telling him I was a Japanese exchange friend of Mark's, but something inside said I had the tools to explain my true self, so I told him direct that it was me, Mark.

'Do what?'

'Mark. Your best friend. Standing on the doorstep of my house.'

'You're Chinese.'

'Yeah, I know it's weird, but it really is me. And I'm Japanese, not Chinese.'

'Mate, what the fuck...where's Mark?'

'Look...I can prove it.'

'What?'

I told him as many things as my brain would allow about our shared history. The nights out, the sessions at the gym, the school-days, that time at paintball we got cornered in the gorse and he shot another guy in the knee, point blank range.

'Shut up, where's Mark?'

'You don't believe me?'

'Believe what? You're Chinese, mate. A Chinese nut.'

'Barry, you fucking clown.'

He tried to look past me into the hallway, but I blocked him.

'Are you gonna believe me or not?'

'Really not in the mood for this shite. Where's Mark? Is he in there?'

'Okay. Fuck off then, mate.'

'You what?'

I shut the door before he could say anything else, and rode out the glass banging that followed.

Fucking Chinese...

+++

That night I decided to stay awake.

No naps, no bed.

I watched what must've been around thirty episodes of *Doctor Who*. It was amazing, *GENTE+* had pretty much all of them, and, each one that came on...I realised almost instantly that I'd already seen it.

By six in the morning my eyes were as dry as the Gobi Desert, so I turned off the TV and walked slowly to the mirror in the bathroom. Okay, reveal time. If it happened one night then it could be fixed the next. Or maybe some kind of slow fade, like make-up that smudged after crying.

I splashed the mirror with water and wiped it with my jacket sleeve, building up hope.

Then looked.

Nope.

Still Japanese.

Kuso.

+++

The next day I thought about watching *Doctor Who* all day and night and going to sleep at six the next morning, but I didn't.

Instead, I went to *361*.

Old Multan was surprised to see me. I looked for *The Comma* but it wasn't there, so I asked him if there were any copies left.

'No more *Comma*, sorry.'

I asked him if my voice seemed familiar to him and he said, 'yes, scouse.'

'Yeah, but...like anyone you know?'

'Sorry?'

'Is it like someone else's voice around here?'

'Yes. Everyone.'

'Multan, it's me. Mark.'

'Excuse me, there's someone behind you.'

'No, there isn't.'

'The entrance, coming in now.'

'That guy? He's not even touching the door.'

'Have a nice day.'

Muttering *ten years I've been coming here* not even close to under my breath, I passed the guy coming in, headed into the main forum area and sat down on the nearest bench, which, in the city centre or by the dock, would've been rail-segregated or, worse, spiked. Fucking Adventurists. Putting their pathetic little stamp on the only part of Liverpool they could get their mitts in. Dazzling people with their KOL propaganda. Introducing separate ticket, toilet and seating costs for footy matches. If Jeff Fahey knew about this shit...

Wait, who?

Jeff Fahey?

There was noise close by, something not English.

I turned, making an awe-like *abbb* sound. Across the square, dotted around the circular tables, was a horde of primary school kids doing interactive language sessions. As usual, the Twi and Portuguese groups were the most popular, but Japanese wasn't doing too badly. Seven kids, far as I could see, and one very sleepy-looking teacher.

One of the kids glanced over and saw me and started jabbing the girl next to him. She turned and did the same to the kid next to her, and pretty soon they were all pointing my way, shouting out *hey* and *doko kara kimashita ka?*

For a few seconds, I was puzzled...then I remembered.

My face.

Fuck.

+++

I sat at home, elevated on mum's comfy chair, wondering if it was a good idea to go out again. My heart said, yes, hit the *Waverley Loop* for lunch, but my gut said hide. Someone would undoubtedly start talking to me, someone I probably knew, and what would I say then?

And another thing...no, another name.

Keni.

For some reason, there were Japanese people in my head calling me Keni.

A guy lying on the floor with a knife, calling me Keni.

The girl in the wet towel, calling me Keni.

And more.

Jesus.

Whatever this was...wherever it was coming from...it was getting worse.

Maybe I should go to the park, get some air...Liverpool air...

+++

I didn't go out.

I watched *Doctor Who* instead.

At around three in the morning, I turned off the TV. The reason I wasn't changing back was because I wasn't asleep, was that it?

Agreeing with myself, I went upstairs and tried to sleep, but I couldn't stop thinking about Japan.

There were even more memories now. Things I couldn't possibly have done, but I did, I had done them, it was me in the scene. A little Japanese me, with a Japanese mum and Japanese dad and Japanese brother. And my Japanese dad was a bastard. He kept on hitting me with a metal ruler when I came back with B's on my report card. Sometimes he even hit me for getting A's.

I looked at my phone next to the bed.

Barely any time had passed, not even ten minutes. *Kuso*.

I got off the bed and grabbed *The Martian Chronicles* from the shelf and opened up to the pages with the note between them. It was still there. I read it again.

Wah, still couldn't remember writing it, but it was definitely my handwriting.

And the novels he mentioned...seemed vaguely familiar. As if I had actually sat down and written some. But...

Lunar something...

Was that one of them?

+

Quick theories and counterpoints concerning the letter [presented to me by Tsukubashi-San]

Tsukubashi stood in a typical Japanese classroom, stick in hand, back to the whiteboard.

'Attention, kid. You listening?'

The Japanese version of me was sitting at one of the desks, the only kid in the room.

'Right then. Beginning point...the letter.'

He pressed a button and the room went dark.

A spotlight appeared on the board, followed by a recorded copy of Tsukubashi's own voice.

- Point one – It has your name.

- Counterpoint – You can't remember writing it.

- Point two – It has your handwriting.

- Counterpoint – You can't remember writing it.

- Point three – The letter tells you that you are not you.

- Counterpoint – How can you not be you?

- Point four – You now have a Japanese face.

- *Counterpoint – You are not in Japan. You are in Liverpool.*
- *Point five – You have memories of a Japanese childhood.*
- *Counterpoint – You also have memories of an English childhood.*

First theory off the bat: The letter is false. There's a problem with your brain and you're hallucinating the words that don't make sense.

Problems: Your face has also changed. Your family has disappeared. How can memories be planted into your brain?

Conclusion: Theory dismissed.

'Do you concur, kid?' he asked, whacking the whiteboard.

I jumped, startled by the stick and the sudden voice, then nodded.

'Do you have anything to add?'

'No.'

'Smart boy. Next.'

Second theory: The letter is true. You have been switched with the real Mark and his memories have been implanted in your brain. Therefore the Japanese memories are real.

Problems: Why would you have Japanese memories? What kind of operation intends the patient to wake up with two different mind states? And why is the face still Japanese?

Conclusion: Theory sustained as default. The operation was conducted but there was an error, or several errors. You are not Mark. You are a boy from Japan.

'Do you concur, kid?'

I stared forward, in a daze.

He threw the stick against the board. 'Do you concur?'

No, I don't. I'm Mark.

I nodded.

'Do you have anything to add?'

Yes, it's wrong. There's something wrong...

I shook my head.

'Good. Lesson over.'

He turned on the light and left the room, but the scene didn't end. Instead, I got up and walked to the board and started writing some of my own theories.

Theory three: Your friends are playing a joke on you. The Japanese face is just make-up and prosthetics. Like Sean Connery in that Bond film.

Problems: Shit, I don't know. None I can think of.

Theory four: Some scientists from the college are playing a joke on you. They tricked you two nights ago. They changed your face with quick surgery and implanted some random memories.

Problems: None. This has cheap science written all over it.

Tsukubashi came back into the room and asked what exactly I thought I was doing.

I told him I'd come up with two more theories to explain things, and that these two were closer to what I wanted to believe.

He walked over and read the two new theories.

'Please don't disprove these ones, Sir. I need them.'

He bent down and picked the stick up off the floor then stood up straight and threw it at the board again. 'Ridiculous and ridiculous.'

His leathery, pock-marked face turned on me.

'Theory two is undoubtedly the truth. Accept it.'



Asami the psychopath

facing the chapel wall, jejune, sweaty, asking do I want to get up close

watch anacondas pegging each other

prod their tails

No? Then I'm off, to Papua New Guinea, the suicide beach, with the book
about the homeless man finding a deserted soviet, you stay here

lost with Fahey in the car park

no one repairing anything, fixated on

white hole miniature, LEGO size

basketball size

swimming pool size

gargan-

+++

The white hole faded leaving me stretched out sideways across the bed,
phone still in hand from the night before.

Screen lit up and said *muted*. Then eleven.

Not midday.

Good.

Folded out next to my ashy elbow was the note, the thing allegedly written by myself, begging to be re-read.

Accepting, I skimmed through, shaking my head all over again.

If it were true, it meant there were some Japanese scientists on the other side of the world who had really fucked something up.

If it weren't true...

The doorbell rang downstairs.

'Fuck off, Barry,' I hissed at the floor.

The doorbell ignored the hiss, rang again.

'Jesus...'

I jumped off the bed and ran towards the window and shook my hands and fake-jabbed at whoever's melon head was in front of that door.

'Fuuuuuck off.'

It rang again, implacable.

+++

After throwing on my *CITIZEN OF PLUTO* hoodie and some brandless jogging pants, I stumbled downstairs like a drugged toddler and pulled opened the door.

There were two people in white coats standing there. One, a middle-aged Japanese woman; the other, tall, broad-shouldered and...I wasn't sure, but, for some reason, he felt South-East Asian.

'Mark Boyle?' the woman asked, staring at the top of my skull.

'Maybe.'

'Can we have a word with you?'

No. Fuck off. Only if you can fix my face. You both look fake, like actors. Did Barry send you? I'm tired. That can't be your real skin.

'I suppose.'

+++

They came in and sat down in the living room, their faces genuinely surprised at the size of the place. I offered them a cup of tea, but they refused. I asked if they wanted to watch *GENTE+* and they said no. I asked if they liked *Doctor Who*, and they replied that they didn't know who that was.

Blocking me out, the two possible actors sat there for a while longer speaking only to each other. They were debating back and forth if they should tell me everything or just a quarter.

'No, tell me everything,' I interrupted, shifting myself in front of the TV screen.

They stopped, mouths koi-like.

'Excuse me,' said the woman, recovering the fastest, 'but you can speak Japanese?'

'What do you mean? I'm Scouse, I speak English.'

'But you just-...!' she started, touching her bottom lip.

'I was born here, I live here. This face is-...I don't know what this is, it's just-...it's wrong, but you're gonna tell me what's going on, right? I mean, you have the answers, don't you?'

'*Kuso...*' the South-East Asian man said, slapping his left shoulder.

'What?'

'You're speaking like a native, brother.'

'A what?'

'He means, you're speaking Japanese now.'

'Huh?' I said, pure Japanese.

+++

Seventeen *hubs* and one recording of my own voice speaking Japanese later, we finally got round to an explanation.

The Japanese woman said a lot of things I couldn't really understand, almost like a lecture, but I did manage to pick up some words.

+

Words involved in the truth + amateur interpretation...

+

Forever exchange, something permanent, different face, different country, biological procedure, surgery.

Summary: you were Japanese, now you're North British. They fucked up the face.

Laser gun, malfunction, double-band implant, memory meld, two different mind-views, two contradictory childhoods.

Summary: you had Japanese memories, then they tried to wipe them and give you North British ones. They fucked up, now you have both.

Re-education, memory alignment, face reconfiguration not viable, family adjustment, friend adjustment.

Summary: they can fix most of the memories, but not the face. They can fix everyone else you know to accept what they see as normal, with the exception of the occasional glitch.

+

'You can't change my face back?'

'I'm sorry, no. The original template for...'

The woman stumbled, looking at the family photos on the desk nearby. 'Sorry, I've forgotten your-...'

'Mark.'

'Yes, Mark. That's right. Mark's original template has been lost, I'm afraid, as his side of the procedure was quite smooth.'

'You mean you didn't fuck it up like you did with mine?'

'Brother, that's harsh.'

I folded my arms.

'No, there were no errors in his procedure. He has already settled into your life.'

'He believes he's me?'

'Yes, the memory transfer was complete, no traces left.'

I unfolded my arms and stood up, an idea forming. 'I can give you a photo...'

'Excuse me?'

'...a photo of me, Mark, how I was before...' I pointed at my chin. '...this.'

'Won't work, brother.'

'No, it will, it has to.'

'I'm very sorry, but he's right, it's unviable. A photo doesn't contain enough data for a second procedure.'

I stared back at her, hoping for an *unless*...

'We would need the actual face, and that is clearly off the table.'

'Are you sure?'

'If there were any way we could return your original face then of course we would do that. But there isn't. It is simply beyond our powers.'

'Fuck.'

I sat back down and stared at the screen.

There was something not right...

'But...hang on. Why did you even put me here if my face was like this? Japanese, I mean.'

'Experimentation, brother,' the South-East Asian man replied.

'What does that mean?'

'Do and see, *teme*. Do and see.'

The woman coughed, artificial. 'It means, we knew it was strange, but we wanted to see how your family would react, and your friends.'

'That makes no sense.'

'Do and see, *teme*. The way to progress.'

'It was merely an experiment. Sadly, it didn't work and, although we would very much like to fix it for you, we cannot.'

'So what am I supposed to do now?'

They looked at each other.

'You don't know?'

'There is one thing we can do.' She took off her glasses and spoke while wiping the lens. 'We can extract the Japanese memories.'

'And then?'

'*Kuso*, brother, then you live.'

'Live? As what?'

'A new mind. A new character. Transcendence.'

The Japanese woman leaned in closer to me, her skirt riding up her thighs a little. Not sure if that was intentional. 'We can take you for the procedure now, if you wish?'

'Now?'

'Yes.'

'What kind of procedure?'

'It will be painless, don't worry. You may need to re-learn a few things afterwards. Our best guess is, you'll have the mind of a fourteen year old, thereabouts, but you will at least be fully British. Or Northern British to be precise. With the added bonus of residual Japanese language skills that can be re-activated with minimal study. What do you say?'

'A fourteen year old?'

'Yes.'

I thought carefully, remembering how shitty high school was...both of them. Could I really go through with this? Two people just turn up and say, hey, we fucked up the first time, let us fiddle with your brain again...it was nonsense, wasn't it?

'Well, what is your answer?'

I looked around the room for no real reason. Nodded at the TV screen. Then thought of a good reason to look around the room again: to make these fuckers sweat. Why not? I didn't care if they were sick of this scene or my surliness...the fact was, they'd done this to me, I didn't owe them anything, least of all basic manners.

'My answer is fuck off,' I replied, finally.

'Are you sure, young man?' asked the woman, ignoring the insult.

'Yes.'

'Brother...'

I turned to the South-East Asian man, keeping my face deadpan.

'Fuck off, brother.'

+++

As I corralled them back out the front door, the Japanese woman turned and informed me in the same survey-drone voice that my family would be ready for re-integration in a couple of days.

'You mean that's when they'll be back?'

'Yes.'

'And my friends?'

'They'll take a little longer. A week, two weeks, perhaps.'

The South-East Asian man stepped forward, his hands clasped together.

'Come on, take the op. Let a brother make amends.'

'Not interested.'

'Salve the wounds a little.'

'No.'

'A hasty line, way too hasty.' He turned to the street, shaking his head at both the repair shop cafe and the green uniform guys relaying a patch on the pavement outside it. 'You'll be lost here, brother. This kind of weirdness.'

'I'm not your brother.'

'*Kuso...*'

He stared at me, head vibrating instead of shaking, until the woman grabbed his beer barrel of an arm and dragged him to a waiting minivan.

'Fucking scientists...'

I closed the front door and went up to the bathroom, cried like a wretch for half an hour then wiped the mirror with tap water and began re-examining my new face.

+++

The next day, I ended up at college.

Part of me thought about turning back when I got to Waverley Hub and saw another Japanese guy waiting in the queue, but then I heard him speak in the same accent as me and relaxed a little.

The campus itself wasn't far, and when the shuttle pulled onto the main road leading in, I had the weird feeling that there should've been trees lining the sides. And that the football field was too small.

Probably something I'd seen in a film before.

Or an anime.

Or my old shadow life.

Silhouette life.

Silhouette existen-

+++

I walked into the lecture hall without a word, sat down next to an Irish guy I sort of knew and said nothing to him either.

No one batted an eyelid.

No one asked me anything.

Apart from the girl on my other side who said she was thinking of learning Japanese and maybe she'd ask me for lessons at some point so it'd be good if I didn't go anywhere. But that wasn't technically a question, so it didn't count.

+++

In the seminar, the lecturer rehashed all the nonsense he'd talked about in the lecture. Derrida, Deleuze, Itō, the slow re-territorialisation of the future, tired space. He left pockets of silence for people to talk into, but no one did, and so he was forced into continuing himself.

I didn't say a thing...just made notes and nodded a lot.

The girl in the next seat asked if I was okay, if I needed her to translate.

I laughed.

Then said quite a stropmy no.

At the end of the seminar, the lecturer called me over and enquired whether or not I'd registered with the department staff yet. I told him it was me, Mark.

'I'm sorry, Mark...?'

'Mark Boyle.'

He looked at his list.

'Mark...Boyle...ah, I think I remember you.'

'I usually talk more, but today I was a bit tired.'

'Yes, everyone was a little quiet today...never mind.'

He looked at his list again then up at me, confused.

It was the face.

Obviously.

'This new look? Right, what it is, basically...there were two scientists who...'
I stopped, looking at the crayon-drawn Jung portrait on the nearby wall. 'Last week I had reconstructive surgery to make myself look more Japanese...for personal reasons.'

'Oh no, it's not that, I understand about the face.'

'You understand?'

'It's your name that's the issue. You see, it isn't here anymore.'

I looked over the desk and onto the list. He was right, no Mark Boyle.

'Huh, where am I?'

'I think...'

Wait, the letter...

'...you must've quit. But as you seem uncertain...'

Mark said he'd quit. He said it was a piece of shit college.

'...it may be an admin error.'

'No, I think I did quit. It's right.'

He looked into my Japanese eyes and said nothing.

'Suppose it's kinda weird that I turned up,' I added, looking at the erratic hair lines of Jung, then down at the lecturer's desk.

'It is a little strange, yes.'

'Sorry, it won't happen again.'

I turned and went towards the door.

'There's always a way back, Mark,' he said as the door was closing. 'If you ever change your mind.'

+++

The house was empty.

The others would be back from the *Welsh mountain* in a couple of days and, according to the science nuts, more conditioned to accept the new state of things.

Whatever, they wouldn't kick me out at least.

And was it so bad, having this face? It made me different at least.

Stand-out-able.

And there were the two sets of thoughts playing in my head. Two streams.

At first they were divergent, but now, after only two days they were starting to...do the other thing, move closer, interact, mingle, whatever you called it.

The first stream:

...moon, space, moon, Asami, space, aliens, moon, Yosh, Knife, moon, brother, Yosh, space, Tsukubashi, the alien in Alien, Ryu, black aliens, subtext, Tsunashima, science, moon, space, moon, Yosh, Beyond The Rabbit Hole...

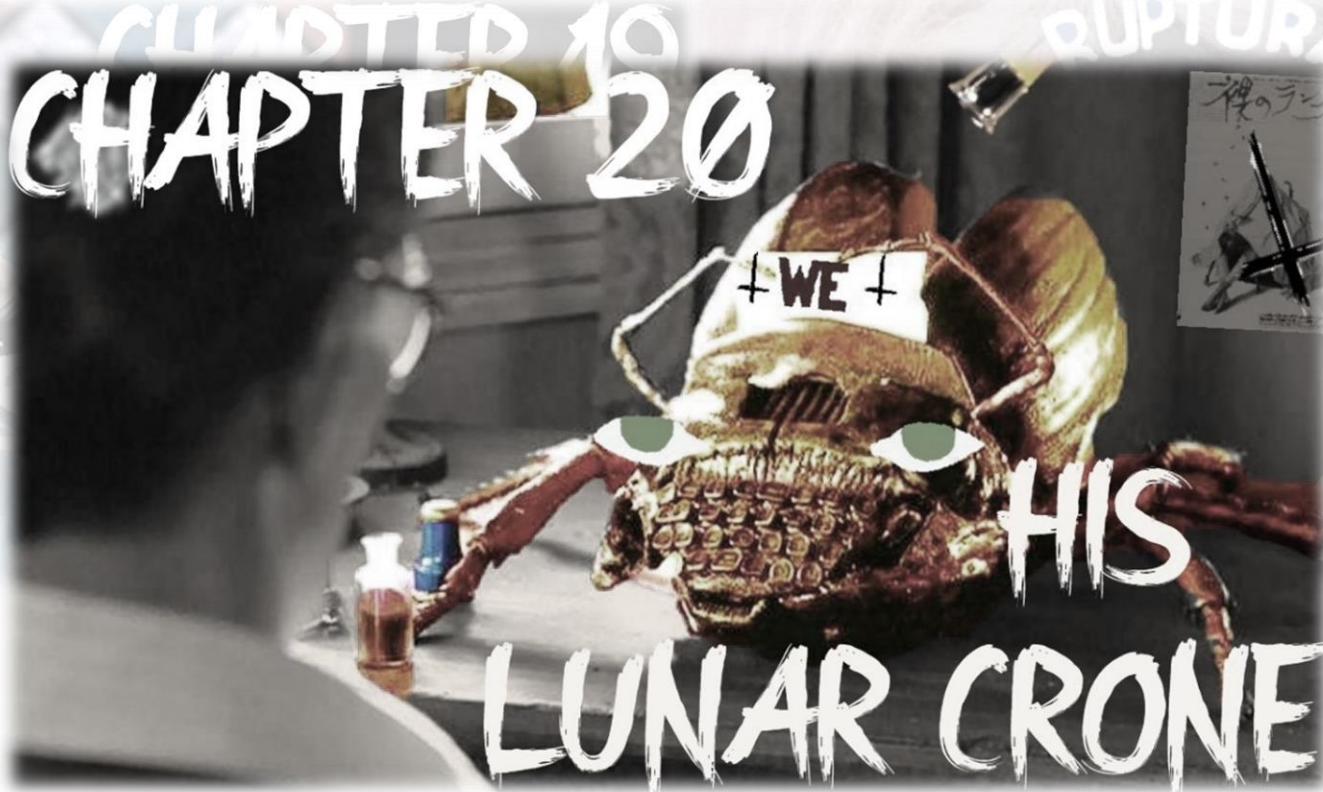
The second stream:

...writing, writing, words, words, genius, failed, failed, publish, Le Guin, Liverpool Tsukubashi, Void Galaxia, writing, writing, sci-fi, Moon Factory 7, physics, credibility, writing, credibility, no readers, failed, no readers, quit, quit, worthless, failed, failed...

The first stream was the *Japanese Me*. The second, the *Mark Me*.

And the answer to unite them both...

Obviously.



Over the next couple of days I gathered together all the things my alt-Japanese brain told me I would need to make my masterpiece. The plan: until the family unit came back, I'd write. When they came back, I'd still write. When my friends came back, I'd write harder.

Fuck all those zombies, this was a mandate.

+++

Then I had a counter-thought:

I don't need to write, pseudo-Mark's already done it for me. The letter said he'd written a whole bunch of stuff, sci-fi novels. That I somehow couldn't remember a page of. Because I was the pseudo-Mark. Was that right?

Making myself a cup of Kerala-imported tea, I returned to my room and turned on the laptop.

Wait, didn't he say his stories were hopeless?

The computerr loaded and the files came up on the desktop. I saw one that said *Dream Fucker – a novel* and double-clicked.

Nah, it was just modesty. People would call you arrogant if you openly hailed yourself a genius, so protective measures were required. And was he the type to boast? I mean, was I the type? Either lobe of me? No way, I was humble, to everyone except maybe my parents. If anything, I was too humble, apologising for even picking up a pen sometimes. And why couldn't I remember writing any of this? It was in his memories, so why didn't I know about it?

Fucking Frankenstein scientists.

Dream Fucker appeared on screen, in giant comic sans.

DREAM-FUCKER

By Mark Boyle

+

Copyright

I, Mark Boyle, own all rights to this work. Don't steal it or try to steal it because I will call some lawyers and deal with you.

Dream Fucker is an original work. Any similarities to real people is not true.

+

Chapter One

+

It was a dark, moony night in the wild, unkempt lands of Gindor. The moody forest glittered in the moonlight, and the stony, formidable castle nearby glittered in the moonlight too.

Landu moved swiftly through the gaps in the trees, sensing danger up ahead. He moved fast towards the castle, wondering if the evil witch Betitso had slaughtered his entire brethren yet or if he still had time to save them. It would be a close call. Betitso was unpredictable.

'With the Gods behind me, I shall slay her with sacred fury if she has touched a hair on their heads. She shall fall before my sword and feel my furious vengeance, if she has touched them in any way,' he thought vengefully to himself, as he rushed quickly through the forest.

The moonlight glittered on the grass of the field ahead and on the stony castle walls that he would soon reach. It looked akin to a silver field and supernatural castle, made by ancient gods, so wondrous and decadent.

'If she dares harm a bone in their body, I shall wield my sword with the fury of a thousand bellions,' he said with a sadistic grin. 'The evil witch will not anticipate such fury.'

Up ahead, suddenly, a hundred orcs came out of the long grass of the field, surprising Landu as he came out of the forest and onto the field, the field they were now all occupying, a mass of violent intrusion, of brutal invasion, of primal orc scum ready to turn the lush green blades of grass a deep, deadly scarlet...'

+

I stopped reading and scratched my neck.

'How.'

Rubbed my eyes.

'The.'

Stared at the text on the screen again.

'Fuck.'

This thing...was a wreck. Beyond *keuso*. *Kusoier* than *keuso*. The kind of stuff a primary school kid would write.

I closed the file and looked at the posters on the walls. Biker Kaneda strolling to his red bike. LEGO Captain Eto waving a broken phaser in the air. Hari Seldon in a wheelchair, entrenched in pale-blue light. Biker Kaneda again.

God in the hills...

How could someone like *Akira* or *Void Galaxia* then sit down and write this?

I looked around the room at all the other things that made up the person called Mark. There was a drinks coaster on the table nearby, with a shitty caricature of Margaret Thatcher on top. For some reason, there were horns on the top of her head.

Wait a minute...

This *Dream Fucker*...maybe it wasn't as bad as I thought.

Maybe it was a one-off.

Maybe he was writing it as a joke...

Maybe it was his first ever story and he got a hell of a lot better later...

I closed the file and opened a different one in the same folder.

Lunar crone.

The title wasn't much of an improvement, but maybe...



LUNAR CRONE

MARK BOYLE



CHAPTER 4

On the way back home I stopped at the heart-stone on the road to Necro-Priscilla's kingdom and met one of the vicious Jackal men.

He had a stony face and wild, untamed hair like Val Kilmer in the film where he had long hair like Mowgli, and looked vicious.

'Where are your brothers?' I asked curiously.

'My brothers are laying siege to the domain of Necro-Priscilla, my young comrade,' he replied with determination.

'What are you doing here?' I asked.

'I am waiting for you, my young comrade. We need your steel in the fight with Necro Priscilla as she is far too powerful for the Jackal men to conquer alone,' he said as if the question had been weighing heavily on his weary mind for numerous moons.

'Okay, then I shall come,' I said, jovially.

'And you shall fight with us against the Necro-Queen?'

'Yes, I shall fight with you against her, Jackal man, my friend,' I said.

'Excellent. Oh, where is your maiden, Vikoza?' he asked, with a worried countenance on his face.

'Alas, she is at the bottom of the icy lake,' I answered ponderously.

'Oh, woe is the fate of the innocent. Is she dead?' he asked.

'Yes, she died just now. I could not save her though I tried quite hard, but I cannot swim well and the lake was very icy.'

'It is not your fault, Banki. You tried as hard as a thousand Demkakons, I am certain of this.'

'I did.'

'Come, let us start our journey to the Necro-Queen. She is far away and there will be many obstacles along the way including the forest of dankness and another lake, which harbours the ice-mongers of Rekbobula. They are devilish men, I warn thee,' he said with red alert on his face. 'They hunt live men with forks and string.'

'We shall be careful around those ice-mongers,' I confirmed to him.

'Off we go then. Tell me, have you eaten?' he asked, his eyes glimmering in the mid-summer sun.

'Oh, I had a bowl of tong before I left this morning,' I said, remembering the brown texture of the tong and smiling.

'Tong. Great. It reminds me of simpler times. Not like now.'

'It is a dark time now.'

'Yes, it is dark, and Necro-Priscilla is a torturous foe. She swept over our land last August and used magical fire and maniacal orc-men to burn all our land. We viciously detest this evil sorceress and she shall pay the ultimate price with our deepest, fatalistic fury.'

'We shall kill her for sure. There is not a man nor orc in this whole kingdom that can stop brave men like us. Except perhaps the black knight of Yeovillian. He is strong and able and will likely stop us if we fight badly on that particular day.'

'We shall fight well on all days,' he cried, raising his sword in the air like a long stick with a t-shirt showing his face on the end of it.

'Great. Then nothing can stop us,' I said.

I got on my horse and we rode across the fields of Fjidor towards the domain of Necro-Priscilla. The death of the lovely Vikoza weighed heavily on my heart, but I knew I had to forget about her somehow if I was to truly help the Jackal-men defeat the Necro-Queen and the black knight of Yeovillian, and the ice-mongers of Rekbobula too.'

+

I turned away from the computerr and rubbed my eyes.

It didn't seem possible...he seemed like an intelligent guy, liked *Akira*, went to college, or used to go to college, had read other sci-fi books, classics...had a fucking brain and eyes and some kind of taste-trigger that told him, this is shit, really, really shit...didn't he?

But...

Lunar Crone. Dream Fucker. God knows what else.

How?

+

Ten Step guide to what I did when attempting sci-fi

[Notes by an amateur, but not as bad as other Mark]

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Step one – chose ten well-regarded authors: Tsukubashi, Heinlein, Haldeman, Le Guin, Dick, Anderson, Bradbury, Bley, Chu and Aziz. Not Mark Fucking Boyle.

Step Two – went to the college library and found four of those authors, each with one book. [My card still worked, not sure why. And Mark was right, it was a piece of shit college; decoration looked ugly and the man at the desk kept trying to sell me package offers. Typical adventurist scam. Should've gone to the Community Hub instead.]

Step Three – laid the four books on my bed: *The Forever War*, *The Dispossessed*, *Tao Zero*, *I'm All Alone In The Kuiper Belt And That's Okay*.

Step Four – from *The Forever War*, took the idea of a drawn out war with an alien force. That would be my plot.

Step Five – from *The Dispossessed*, took the idea of two opposing ideologies, the science versus naturalism [I'm not sure if this was accurate, but it's what I got from the synopsis, so that's what I used.]. So, the aliens in my story would be naturalists, and the humans would be science buffs.

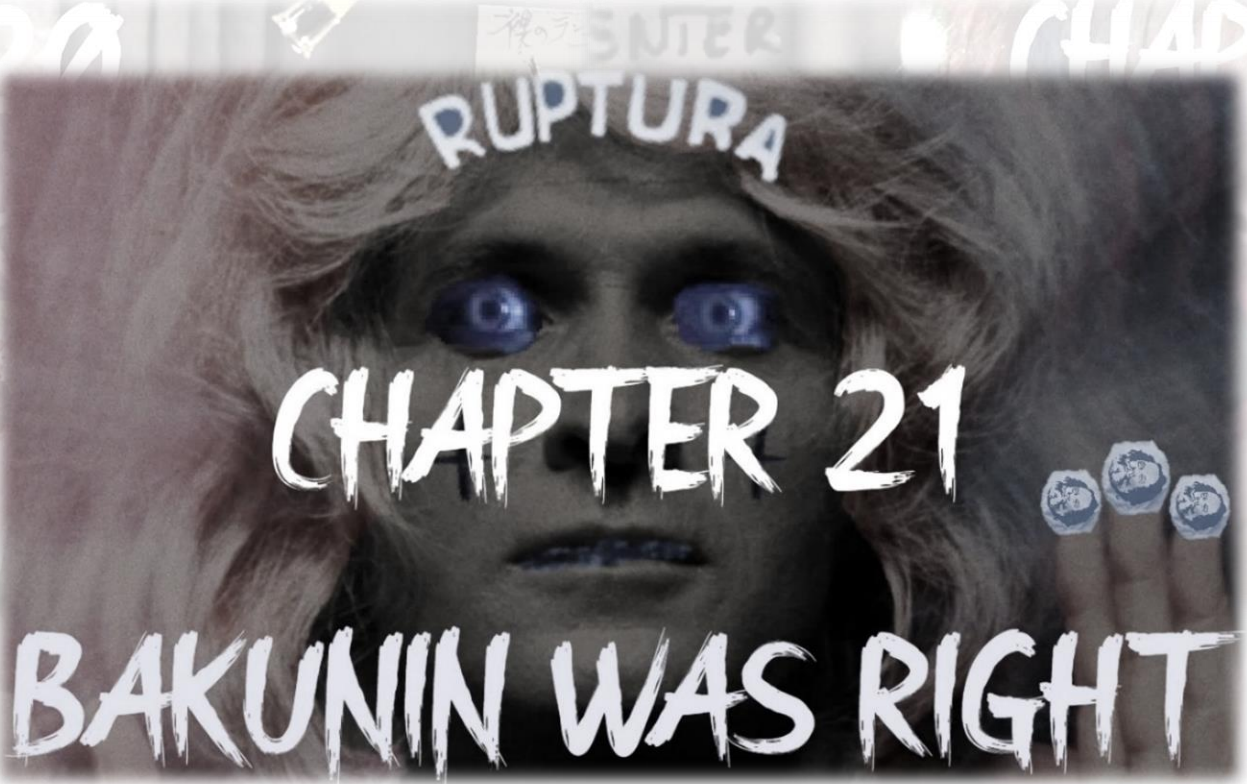
Step Six – from *Tao Zero*, took the universal human language of Swedish. My characters would all speak this language. I also borrowed the main protagonist, the hero, and turned him into my human antagonist. The aliens would also have some bad guys, but with less page-time, so I'd figure them out later.

Step Seven - from *I'm All Alone In The Kuiper Belt And That's Okay*, swiped the main character, Salvo Cheung. He was an idiot and a sensualist, and a perfect foil to my cold, science-buff, bad guy.

Step Eight – wrote down the plot outline. Basically the same as *The Forever War* – the idiot and the science-buff, bad guy get sent to different alien planets to fight the enemy, and then come back to a changed Earth. The first time they return, the main language is Swedish. [Edit: each time they come back there will be a new universal language].

Step Nine – write the first chapter before the family comes back.

Step Ten - ??



The family came back three days later.

'Mark, luv, we're home,' Mum yelled, slamming the front door against the porch wall.

'Half dead and starving,' added Billy, stumbling over his own bike.

I was in the living room, 90% watching *Doctor Who*, the other per cent writing the second chapter of my *maggie opus* [as Barry called them].

They all piled in, Dad carrying a rolled-up tent, the rest of them clutching a couple of pegs.

'Son, you missed a cracking mountain.'

'Really?'

'Mark, it was fucking hell...'

'Billy, don't spoil things. It was lovely.'

'...serious, think my legs are gone.'

They all sat down and gawped at the TV screen. Charlie looked at the linoleum floor. Didn't move for several minutes. I asked her directly if she was alright and she nodded.

'So, what's been going on here, son? Any dramas?' Dad asked, grabbing the remote.

'Not much. Face is still the same.'

'Well, wait till you get older, son. Then you'll see a few changes.'

He laughed, they all did, except Charlie.

+++

I slouched against the chipped back board of my bed and re-read the first chapter.

The second was becoming a bit of a struggle, so I wanted to go back and see how I'd set everything up; the two main characters, the spaceship, the aliens...all that stuff.

It didn't take long.

So I read through again.

Then went through it a third time, taking it extra slow to try and absorb all the words.

Then a fourth time.

A fifth time.

Too exhausted to do a sixth, I skimmed back through and wrote out a summary:

+

'The science-buff, bad guy walks down a huge, glass-walled corridor to board the spaceship, talking about how brutal the aliens were in combat, how naturalism was shit, and then at the end of it, he reaches the junction of the corridor and shoves into the other guy, the Salvo Cheung character. He bullies Salvo, tells him he's an idiot then they split and walk off. Back in their rooms, the siren sounds, flashes green, and a tannoy General orders everyone to battle stations.'

+

No, no, no. Way too bland.

Split POV in the same chapter.

Confusing?

The science buff bad guy just walking and talking, the Salvo character overly passive. And the dialogue; why were they all talking the same way...and so rigid too?

Edit: why had I written them to talk the same way, and so rigid too?

Why were there only two people on the whole ship?

'This is wank,' I muttered, punching the pillow beside me.

Complete wank. I'm not a writer, I'm a wretch.

Fucking *kasu* cunt.

Closing the file with a feral hiss, I looked around the desktop.

Wretch...

I opened up *Dream-Fucker* and read the first chapter again.

'Okay...maybe not that bad.'

+++

After writing another page, re-reading it, deleting it and staring trance-like at the *Akira* poster on the wall, I picked up one of the other books I'd liberated from the library.

Notes on Anarchism - Jeff Fahey

No idea why I'd taken it out. Related to anarchist theory perhaps? An elaboration on Fisher or Bōl? Then there was the name, Jeff Fahey. I remembered wondering if it was the same guy who'd done the *Lawnmower Man*, and if it was, why the hell he was writing about anarchism.

No, but it was more than that; the book seemed familiar somehow, like I'd read it before. Probably when I was Japanese.

Yeah, suppose I must've done. Strange how I couldn't remember it though. I assumed most of the memories had come back by now and, even if I couldn't recall them specifically, they were still in there somewhere, lying dormant like...something

sleepy. But then, if Jeff Fahey wasn't there, if I couldn't remember any of him or his book...

Ah, forget the struggle. Maybe if I read a few pages, it'll come back.

I opened to a random chapter somewhere in the middle and hopped through.

+

"There are two dilemmas for the true anarchist:

1] Despite superficial appearances in certain nations, the capitalist system remains unchallenged, entrenched, not to mention corrupt and unworkable. Like a cosy, cunning parasite, it lurks. To fight it head on is futile, as has been seen by the failure of recent initiatives, therefore the battle must be waged from outside the confines of its mechanisms.

2] The current system is normal, accepted by just enough people to ensure its continued existence. As Bakunin once said, everyone loves the idea of a shopping mall with a water slide.

+

From this contradiction, the crux of the issue becomes clear: how can you demolish a system that belongs to, and is steered by, the enemy? A system that many despise, but also have no wish to die in order to replace?

+

A socialist would say:

Guillotine the rich [figuratively or literally].

Tax the greedy fuckers.

Take the reins of the national budget and redistribute based on need.

Allow the workers to own the place where they work.

+

An anarchist would say:

Dual power.

Break the concept of hierarchy.

Collectivize at the grassroots level, not from above.

Wear black and red.

+

Both with some good ideas, some melodramatic, yet which course is the correct one to follow?

Does one not retain hierarchy?

Is the other not utopian?

The true answer is, of course, both glib and simplistic: Bakunin was right.

+

I put down the book and looked at the LEGO Captain Eto. Tried to think in depth about what I'd just read. But it was hard to dwell on any one detail.

One thought stuck: hadn't Liverpool or North Britain succeeded at some of this already? The collectives idea, the communal budgeting. That was us. And hadn't some other countries done it too? Ghana, Slovenia, Finland, others that I wasn't completely sure about...

I picked up the book and checked the inside cover. Ah, that's why. It was twenty years old, before the UK broke up. Was there a new version out? Updated with the current initiatives included?

Lifting my phone off the pillow, I checked online.

Yeah, there was something. Not a new version, but a new book. *The Next Step Forward* – Jeff Fahey. I clicked on it and read through the summary. Apparently, Fahey had noted the various changes in the world and was adamant that it was a capitalist trick. The Collectives in certain nations were top-down, not grassroots, and *power* had allowed it to happen therefore it couldn't truly be a revolutionary act. Liverpool was name-checked too – a city still feeding the capitalist tick at its core,

with most workers shunning the collectives and seeking employment in private businesses near Bold Street and the Albert Docks.

Wah, that was me.

Fahey was talking about me.

And he was kind of right. Liverpool was like that. And the way he said it made me angry that it was like that. Bol had said the same things too. And Fisher, before he died. To some degree. Actually, he was more descriptive, than prescriptive if I was remembering his *slow cancelling of the future* thing right... miserably predictive.

But...how could it all be changed back?

System-wise, what could we do?

Get rid of the state completely?

Make more zines?

Shaking my head, I picked up a pen and tore a page out of the notebook. I thought of a thousand different things to write down, but none of them would coalesce into an actual sentence. Or a coherent theory. The only thing I did come up with was; what the hell happened to *Lawnmower Man 2*?

Did they ever make it?

Was more than ten quid spent on the CGI?

Why were the effects in the first one so bad?

Even *Doctor Who* creatures looked better and they were just men in costumes. Or women in costumes. Or creatures in costumes. Or the director in a costume.

What did they do to you, Fahey?

Blackball you?

I put down the pen and stared at the wall again, at the posters that seemed both alien and familiar at the same time.

The rich...capitalism...guillotines...hierarchy...

I tried to conjure up genuine solutions, mostly on the anarchist side, but all I could think of was a Japanese guy telling me not to step on people.

Ordering me not to pick on kids who had small towels.

Then a VR place with a tattooed Japanese guy.

Pluto 2280, the porn version.

Tattooed guy confused.

Aggressive.

The two of us in a bedroom.

A knife.

May have to cut you, teme.

My brain registered the spirals I'd scribbled on the notepad and wondered what the fuck I was doing.

Exile the Japanese shit, it's history.

Focus on the topic at hand.

Concentrate.

The system is set...completely set, ossified. Nothing we can do about it. Maybe one day, if enough people cared, if the state got sloppy?

Forget. It. Mark.

I pushed the notepad away and looked at the screen again. Re-read the previous chapter of my shitty sci-fi novel. Then a page of *Lunar Crone* to balance things out. Then a chapter of *Dream Fucker* to feel like a king again.

When I was done, I closed all the files and just stared at the space background on the screen, reading out the names of some of the folders.

Then squinting.

Just past the Byrgius Crater was something titled: 'PLEASE READ MARK'.

It was the last file saved and the letters were capitalised, so maybe it was something important. Or desperate. Or dangerous. Animal porn? Homeless snuff?

Checking the door was closed first, I dived in.

+

'Me again, mate, lol sorry.

I'm hoping you've found the other thing first, cos if you haven't then this is gonna be even more bizarre than that one hehe...anyway, I'm gonna imagine that you're reading this one second, so here we go...

You've probably read some of my stuff by now and seen how shit it is lol, or maybe you think it's not that bad, who knows? But, if you wanna get into it more then there's this website I go on quite a lot...ok, every day, mate, lol, I can't help it, it's addictive...and it's a pretty good place to get people to look at your writing and say what they think...actually, I'm not sure if you'll remember this anyway, but I didn't wanna take the chance...it's called www.authomaton.com and you can use my e-mail and password to log on there...you still remember those, right?

Also, one of the biggest regrets I have is on that site too. It almost stopped me doing the surgery actually, but then I realised it was stupid to run your life on what you do online...I dunno if I'm explaining it well or not...what I mean is, I don't wanna mistake my online life for real life, para-social for social.

Anyway, there's a girl on there, Sadia, I talked to her loads and we got on pretty well...she's American and a writer too and pretty young...she's well fit too, seriously man check out her photos and you'll see why I struggled. Only problem is she lives in California so...yeah, I guess that's why I gave up on her and went for what I'm doing...or did what I did [guess it's done by now haha]. But you don't have to, man. If you wanna chase her, I don't mind...I mean, you're me now so I guess it's like I would be getting her too even though I'm not inside my own head anymore. Can't believe I'm writing all this, sounds like I'm turning into David Icke or something lol...

Okay, really gotta go and get this surgery done...I think I'm late already lol. Follow my advice if you want, it's up to you...your body now, not mine.

Cheers mate

Mark.'



The Authomaton Game [and how to get ahead]

Claim – Beat the slush pile! Get read! Get published?

Method: each member has six bookshelves. They can choose what to read and what to back [put on their bookshelf]. They can also leave comments on other members' pages, praising or criticising the writing. Each month, the five books with the highest number of backings will be selected for review by an industry professional.

Members will be able to promote themselves via the website forum or in private messages to other members. These messages will be visible to all in the name of transparency and to prevent bullying and/or harassment.

No abuse of other members will be tolerated.

+

These were the basics.

Of course, there were more rules and regulations to run through, but I didn't need to see them as, for some bizarre reason probably related to those Japanese scientists and their loopy experiment, I already remembered.

The same way I'd read that first letter and remembered that I was, in some fashion, a writer, it was the same again now.

Like the implant had just been shot through the window and directly into my brain.

And something else...

Another implant.

A bigger one.

Her.

The girl he'd mentioned, I knew her somehow. No idea why, but even before he'd written it, I knew who it was gonna say.

The blonde girl.

American.

'Sadia...'

+++

Going to my message inbox on Authomaton, I was instantly hit by a trail of messages, all from her [except one halfway down inviting me to read an octopus/schoolgirl love story written by what looked to be a sixty year old man].

Sadia's last message was first, so I started with that.

'Mark, seriously, where are you?

I know this is weird, it isn't really real life, but I'm kinda worried about you. I've been sitting in that video store caffè I told you about [lots of art students go there, but it's still pretty cool and laidback and the blueberry pie is awesome] reading your book every day, just to see some of your words again...really creepy, I know lol, but I miss you.

Guess I shouldn't say that, but it's true. I kinda think you're the only one who really understands what it's like to be me. The pain and the loneliness...the isolation...

Sorry, I know I shouldn't be so open. Could be loads of weirdoes reading this lol...maybe we should switch to e-mail?

Hope you log on soon and write something new for me.

Sadia xxx'

I counted all the messages she'd left. Seven, and zero replies from me.

Kuso...

What the fuck was he thinking?

No...what the fuck was I thinking?

I clicked on the name and her profile came up, and there was her avatar in the corner, that beautiful, blonde hair in monochrome, those slight lips...just the face, no body shot, no tits, but I didn't care, not with her. She could have had bee-stings and I wouldn't have cared, she was perfect.

Now for my seven-day late reply.

+++

Over the next few days, I camped out in my room, foregoing GENTE+ [mostly] and dedicating myself to the website.

Sadia too, on her side of the world.

First, I'd log on and read the new message she always sent during the night. It was difficult for us to be online at the same time as she lived in the US [some California desert town called Fresno that I'd never heard of] and I was in Liverpool, but I solved that by staying online almost 24/7.

After reading her message, I'd go to her profile and stare at her avatar for an hour or two.

Next, I'd go to the forum and see if she'd started any threads there. If she had, I would read through and check the profiles of all the men who'd replied. If they were young, good-looking or seemed interesting in any way then I would make note of their name.

Then, just to be sure, I'd go back to her message box and check all the people who'd left her so-called private messages [for some unknown reason, the site allowed everyone to see everyone else's messages – to stop the perverts maybe?]. If there were any from the same guys then I'd make another note. I'd also double-check their profile to find out where they lived, if it was close to her in Los Angeles, or Fresno, or wherever it was. If it was, I'd write 'DANGER' in red by their name in my notepad.

For the remainder of the day, I'd reply to her messages and read her books. She had two uploaded and they were amazing, really, really amazing. I couldn't believe how amazing they were, and in contrast, how fucking terrible my own were.

I mean, *Lunar Crone? Dream Fuckee?*

What the hell did she see in me?

I was no genius, I was a talentless schmuck.

Did she see anything?

It was a bit presumptuous but, yeah, she messaged me the most, she left xxx at the end of each one; she cared at least a little.

But why?

She was eighteen, I was twenty-two, was that it?

It had to be. I was the older, wiser one, but not too old, and not wise enough to frighten her back to the tadpoles.

So if I continued being older and wiser, but not in an intimidating way, then it was set.

In theory, at least.

+++

On the fourth or fifth day of holing up in my cave, Dad shouted through the bedroom door that the gymn was on the phone.

'What?'

'The gymn's on the phone,' he said again, as loud as an EK-Bot wrestling announcer.

'Why are they calling you?'

'Dunno. Said they couldn't get through on your end.'

I glanced left towards my phone. Yup. I'd ignored seven of their calls. No messages though, which was odd.

'What do they want?' I shouted.

'Just come to the phone, son.'

'What?'

'Come down here, talk to them.'

I pushed the laptop to the side and lowered it gently onto the blanket. My darling Sadia, I'll be back soon. Then I jumped off the bed and prodded a fist lazily at the door.

'They're on your phone?' I shouted over the banister.

'Probably not anymore, the fucking time you take.'

'Why didn't they just message me instead of calling?'

'I don't know. Ask them.'

A flake of paint was peeling itself off the banister so I dug my nail in and helped it out. There was a chance the gymn was going to fire me. Which would be nice. Then I could spend more time with Sadia. Maybe do what Fahey would do, get a job locally, at the collective gymn. If they'd have me.

'Would you get down here already...!' Dad shouted, coming to the bottom of the stairs.

'Coming.'

+++

A [stereotypical] scouse woman, blonde, orange face, tits bursting out of a Puma top, walked up to the treadmill and asked me what the best speed was for a soft cardio sesh.

I looked at the four red zeros on the speed thingy - the speedometer - confused.

This was one of the rare things I hadn't been able to remember. I mean, the details of a workout. They'd given me the uniform of a personal trainer and there was a picture of the old me on the reception wall which assured customers like this woman that I knew what I was talking about.

But that was wrong.

I didn't have a fucking clue.

'What speed, hon?' she asked again, hands on the treadmill bars.

'The correct speed?'

'Yeah...it's been a while since I've been to one of these places. Not sure if I'm thinking of the right numbers.'

I looked at her legs. Not much flab, but no definition either.

'Let's try a two minute walk at...' I pushed the UP arrow a few times. '...4km/h, then...raise it to 9km/h for a few minutes. After that...'

'Okay, just the walking bit first, hon. See if my calves can take it.'

She started moving and I had little choice, as a professional, but to look at her through the mirror in front of us. Decent legs, not terrible waist, huge tits....she really wasn't bad for...what? A fifty year old?

Mexican beach background didn't help much though.

Typical capitalist tech. VR gym mirrors glazed full of model types, to make normal people feel like a wretch and spend more cash.

Better just to show the wall behind.

Or Sadia's profile pic.

Two minutes passed on the timer and I phased out my Sadia fantasies just long enough to ask my client if she was ready for 9km.

'Yeah,' came back, between ragged breaths.

'Okay, then...9km/h...how about we run for thirty minutes total? Maybe finish on...' I guessed a number in my head. '...18km/h?'

'18? Are you mad?'

'Err...17?'

'Nope.'

'15?'

'Hon...I'm a casual jogger, not Cyril bloody Regis.'

Cyril Regis? *Kuso*. Another gap. Was he a runner? A gym instructor?

Fuck it, didn't matter.

'Okay, how about 12km/h?' I offered, holding up my hands in the universal pose of compromise.

She shook her head. 'The guy at my other gym never went higher than 10 with me...'

'10km/h?'

'That's what I'm comfy with. 10km. Anyway, the other guy...he said distance was more crucial than speed.'

'Not really,' I lied.

'Well, I'm gonna stick to 10 for a bit, first, hon.'

'Sure. 10. Fine.'

Thirty minutes later and she was leaning over the control panel, completely knackered. I looked through the mirror again, peering down her sports vest.

For some reason, even though she'd never find out, I thought, 'sorry Sadia,' and started building my defence: not my fault, I was coerced. Didn't look on purpose, she was showing me. It was an accident. Every guy does it. I didn't even realise they were visible until-

+++

After the treadmill, we did a tour of the weights room - Koh Samui backdrop, holo-models in string bikinis - with a quick run through on how to use the easier machines. I knew most of them but wasn't sure if I was telling her the right instructions. Not that it really mattered. She wasn't an athlete, but also didn't seem fat enough to injure herself either.

We came to the shoulder press.

'You sit with your back straight against the cushion, the seat, here... and you hold the bars here...then you push up, hold, and then bring down. Do that ten times in three cycles.'

'I've never done this one, hon...can you set a low weight?'

'Sure.'

I leaned down and set it at 20kg.

She did the first seven no problem, and with fairly decent technique [far as I could tell].

'Good, good,' I said, mentally patting her on the head, distracted by the Korean model with the buffering head next to an Indian guy floating mid-air above a volleyball net. 'You're doing good.'

'Getting heavy...'

'Three more, nearly there.'

'Uh-huh...'

On the ninth rep her shoulder popped.

'Fuck me...fuck, fuck, fuck...fuck me, fuck me, fuck, fuck...'

As she bent over in pain, telling the whole gym on loop that her shoulder was fucked, all I could think of to help was to look at the VR backdrop again.

The Korean model was topless now, one tit being squeezed by a ghost hand.

General template scene spliced with VIP sex stuff.

Not the first time it had happened.

I continued watching, blocking out the client's moans, hoping a ghost dick would appear, making zero attempt at moral defence.

Why bother?

Sadia would understand.

+++

The gym manager called me into the office and with his very first words said I was fired. I stared back at him, salmon pink polo shirt, veins popping out of his biceps, face of a franchise fisherman, until he said it again.

'Bit harsh, isn't it? I mean, one injury in...how long?'

He told me it wasn't the first injury I'd caused, and it wasn't the sole reason anyway, as apparently I'd been out of contact for over three weeks and they'd had to cover for me too many times.

'Three weeks...' I muttered, trying to think back.

'Going on four. To be honest, I was gonna fire you after two, but Jenny persuaded me to give you one more chance. Sentimental bint.'

I nodded, no idea who Jenny was. 'So today was my last shot?'

'And you failed, kidda. Stunningly. Now fuck off.'

He was a twat, that boss. That's another thing I'd forgotten.

As I walked out of reception, back in my normal clothes, I saw that my picture was no longer on the wall. In its space was a new face, a white face. Or another white face. I'd forgotten about that too. Mark wasn't Japanese-looking, I was.

I stopped by the *Zombie Gymn Attack* poster at the entrance, wondering why they'd never asked about my face.

Had they climbed a mountain in Wales too?

Maybe everyone in Liverpool had.

+++

Back home, I told the others I no longer had a job. Dad laughed when I told him, muttering, 'silly yoga tarts.'

Mum shrugged and told me it didn't really matter, I still had all that money saved in the communal fund.

'Oh yeah,' I said back, 'that money.'

I'd forgotten about *that* money.

'The reward for your dry monk lifestyle the last four years,' said Dad, full-on caustic.

'And not having any girlfriends,' added Billy, laughing.

I stared at them both, blank, unsure if they were right or not. There were a few images in my head, a Brazilian girl naked on top of me, a Ghanaian with her back turned, an Irish girl in the gym changing room, up against the wall. Was that Jenny?

The pictures on the TV changed and so did those in my head.

The Irish girl became Sadia.

In black and white.

Reading her story to me as I pushed into her from behind.

No, that's not-...it wouldn't be her.

Not like that.

I blinked, refocusing on the room. Charlie was in the chair in the corner, the farthest possible point from my position, glaring at the plant a few inches to my left.

You okay crossed my mind, or *wanna go for a walk, talk about stuff?*

But then she shifted the glare directly onto my forehead and, yeah, whatever they'd done to her at that Welsh mountain, it wasn't holding up.

At all.

+++

I went back upstairs, opened up my laptop and messaged Sadia.

Fuck, I've just been fired from the gym - that's where I work - and my boss was a twat about it. Was thinking about you all the time I was in his office, even when he told me to 'fuck off'. What are you doing? Did you make those corrections? I guess you don't really need to, your writing's amazing as it is. Way better than my shit.'

I stopped, re-read and changed *twat* to *asshole*, then pressed send.

The VR-home machine at the end of the bed gave me the eye, and I made half a move towards it...then stopped. A strange feeling hit, *play to death* and *don't play*, *it's the phase 1 shit*, two signals wrestling with each other in my head, the first one in belligerent Japanese.

But *don't play* persevered and, finally, won, pushing me back up to the pillow and then straight onto the laptop.

Sadia. Sadia. Sadia, I repeated like a creepy sex-cult mantra.

The Cult of Sadia.

Sadia of Troy.

Sadiahumati.

I checked to see if she was online [she was] then went through her message box to see who was saying what to her. There were a few guys who seemed to know who I was. One of them, who didn't even have a name, had written: 'Mark seems like a nice young man and is probably good for you.' *Not really here*, that was what he was calling himself. Weird prick.

Seven minutes later, she sent a message back.

'Hey Mark, I've been thinking about you too. I was at school today, sitting in class and there was a picture of some Eastern European farmers in the Geography textbook, and when I saw the faces, you came into my head. Kinda weird, haba, but my mind is kinda like that lol.'

I made the corrections, but I'm not sure if it makes my stuff any better. I read it and I think maybe my stuff's really bad too haba. And don't be stupid, your stuff is wayyyyy better than mine.'

*Your stuff is amazing and when it's in the bookshopp I'm gonna get the first copy...and a kiss baba.
If you'll kiss an ugly girl like me lol.*

Btw, I went to the video store caffè again today - my one girl stand against the rot of VR and GENTE+ baba - and saw some guy actually renting a video. The waitress told me it happens all the time, but I've never seen it before...until today. Wonder how he's gonna play the tape though...do they still make VHS machines?

Yeah, I know, I always talk about that caffè...I can't help it, the blueberry pie's just soooooo good. I hope I can take you there one day to try it...we can share spoons 😊'

I leaned back, body landing awkwardly against the wall.

No sign-off, no xxx. But the rest of it, the actual content...and a smiley face too.

Fuck, she really was keen.

+++

I sent seven messages that night, she sent seven back.

It started with talk about our books and the criticisms we were getting. It ended with her suggesting I should come and visit her in Fresno.

Yeah, I thought, a random internet guy just turning up on your doorstep with a surprise Japanese face he never told you about.

But she was serious, repeating the offer and insisting I could stay at her house, her mum wouldn't mind.

As the final proof, she switched us to email, then to our phones, and gave me her address.

'I know it's crazy and I don't care. We're young, we should do wild things like this, right? And it'll give us some material for our next books haha.'

Sadia, I'm already there.

Ghost dick and all.

+++

At some point during the next night, I got tired of my bed and headed downstairs, hovered a bit by the *Cat People Redux* poster in the hallway then strolled with both hands in pockets into the living room. Mum, Dad and Billy were watching something on *GENTE+*, an old sci-fi show about necromancy. They said Charlie had already gone to bed.

'Bit early for her, isn't it?' I said, half yawning.

'Bit, yeah,' was all I got back.

I put the kettle on, asked them if they wanted tea, and then sat on the only vacant chair [Charlie's] and watched a blonde haired girl in a painter's gown stretch out an arm just so she could throw a green stick into the sea.

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Interpretations of seven messages [while watching TV]

+

Straight – She likes me. We get on well. She thinks I'm a good writer. She wants me to visit her. No declaration of love, so it might simply be a holiday with a friend. Perhaps something grown into, after a week or so.

...a dark-haired woman in green-swirl yukata walks down into a basement and picks up a book. It says *Necromancy - Intermediate Guide* on the cover and the camera hovers on it for at least seven seconds just so we know. Flicking through, the woman reads out a page to herself, then puts the book down and produces a green dagger, presumably from inside her yukata. A spell is muttered, then the blade is plunged into something off-screen. We stay on her face as she frowns, and says fuck, again? The camera loiters a second longer then pans down like a geriatric koala to the thing below; a dark-haired woman's naked

corpse, skin almost transparent blue. And then a close up on her right hand, showing three fingers missing.

Romantic - This is it, this is the one. We're young, we're apart, but it doesn't matter, she likes me. I'm like no one else in her life. I'm special, I'm a writer like her. Those other boys at her school, whoever they are, they're too young, they don't get her. I'm older, wiser, I do. I get her completely. She gets me. The Mark side. She wants me to go over there. But this is no holiday. This is insane. This is the start of something, something nuts. I'll get there, and I know it'll be perfect. We can do anything if I'm physically there. We can get a car, travel across the States. Hold each other in motel beds at night. No parents, no one else. There's something permanent about this, I know it. There's no one else like her in this world, no one, no one, no one.

...the blonde girl, in a FUCK THE MUNICH MANUAL t-shirt, sits at a round table, staring at an empty bowl. To her left and right are two dark-haired women who look almost identical. They tell her it's not the first time it's happened, and if she doesn't do something, Mum 6 will just keep doing it forever. The blonde girl picks up a green stick from the table and holds it up menacingly. She says inter-group fighting is not allowed, especially from early Mum iterations. The dark-haired woman to the right shakes her head, saying it was Mum 3 who was leading it. Before Mum 3 can respond, another dark-haired woman walks in, yawning, and opens the nearest cupboard. No cereal, she says, turning back to the table. The blonde girl [plus Mums 2 and 3] glares back, her fingernail scraping the tip of the green stick.

Negative – it's the fucking internet, what am I doing? Reason this out, Mark, reason it. *Kuso*, I don't even know her. She's a picture on a screen. And American. They don't get people like me, they never have. And she doesn't really get my messages or my writing either, does she? She reads it, but she doesn't really

understand it. She can't, she's eighteen. And her stuff...is it really that good? It seems good, but isn't there too much poetry? What is so good about it exactly? And go to the States? Mate, that's ridiculous. She's a fucking picture, that's it. It'd be awkward, she wouldn't like my face. I'd stay one day then she'd blank me and I'd ask her what was going on and she'd pretend like there was no problem and if I pressed any further she'd just say that she only meant me to come for one day, and it wasn't like it was anything more than that. Mate, go over there? Fuck that, I'm staying here.

...forming a triangle with both hands, the blonde girl tells the six dark-haired women sitting around her in a loose circle that Mum 6 is not truly gone and with a bit of luck they will be able to contact her and find out what happened. One of the dark-haired women mumbles something under her breath, while another gets up and storms off. Leave her, says the blonde girl, putting on a pair of goggles. Focus on the green light. One of them moans that everything is always green, and another snaps back that green is the colour of re-animation. This is not focusing, says the blonde girl. The dark-haired women fall silent. In the middle of the circle, a pale green orb materialises. The blonde girl asks if a dark-haired woman called Mum 6 is there, and the green orb flashes once. That means *specify*, she explains to the circle. We know, mutters one of the Mums. Adjusting her goggles, the blonde girl asks if a recently murdered woman with dark hair and a poor attitude is there. The green orb flashes twice. What does that mean, asks one of the dark-haired woman, but the blonde girl doesn't reply, instead taking off her goggles and mumbling, session over.

Dirty – *Kuso*, she's fucking fit. She's blonde, she's American, she loves the accent, she loves the age factor. I'm an idol for her, and I've gotta make use of it. Go over there, Mark, go over, meet her, let her show you around then the first night put your arm around her. Talk a little first, but get your arm around her and then kiss her.

Maybe feel her up a bit too, and...no, not that fast, not on the first night. Stay there, how long? A week? Two weeks? There's money in the fund, it doesn't matter, just go over there, stay however long it takes. Maybe three or four nights then make the final move. Will she really let me stay at her house? I wonder how liberal her parents are...if they're full lib they'll let me stay...fuck, if they're anarchist, they'll take me up to her room themselves...and then it's really on. If I'm in her house, it is simply not possible to fuck it up. I'll be able to get into her room, her bed, and she's eighteen, it's not like she hasn't done dirty shit like that before. There's no way she's a virgin, no way, she would've told me. And she's talked about other guys, exes who weren't that nice to her, so that means they fucked like baby rabbits then dumped her, or cheated on her, which means she's done it all. And she wants to do more with me. Definitely...it's all in her messages, she's gonna open up for me big time. She wants my dick, and I can't wait to get over there and give it to her. *Kuso*, she's fucking fit...amazing face, amazing eyes...haven't really seen her body, not properly, but I think she might have some tits on her. And if not, who cares? Fuck it, long as she's got a muff...and even if she hasn't, even if it's a dick...that could be good too...just like Katie in my Bōl lecture...

...the blonde girl lies on the floor, unclothed, looking up at the dark-haired woman on the bed, who is wearing her JOHN JOAN DEE t-shirt. She's wiping her fingers on a tissue, with a pile of other, scrunched-up tissues next to her. That will never happen again, says the blonde girl, pulling the duvet down to cover herself. The dark-haired woman finishes with the tissue and throws it down at her daughter/creator's chest. Your cunt tastes like water melon, she says. One of my favourite fruits. Flicking the tissue away, the blonde girl launches herself up and grabs the dark-haired woman by the throat, who smiles and tells her to strap up first, if she really wants to go again. You can't say things like this, Mum 12, the blonde girl replies, voice breaking at the end. You can't. It's not right. Mum 12 stares back at her,

a blank void. You made me, she whispers, finally, stroking her daughter/creator's wrist.

Cynical – Fuck this shit, who needs a woman, anyway? An eighteen year old? I bet she's fucked half of California already. Liverpool's better. Closer. Easier. Utilise face and language skills. Fuck everything.

+++

The next day I sent twelve messages to her. She sent twelve back.

The day after, ten each way.

The day after that, eleven.

The day after that, thirteen.

All on our phones, private, no voyeurs from the site.

None in my house either.

Except two.

The VR-home machine at the end of the bed, and *Notes on Anarchism* on the desk to the side, but both of those were irrelevant now.

Sex was on the cards.

Soon as my dick booked the plane ticket.

+++

I went into the bathroom and washed my face.

Brushed my teeth.

Studied myself in the mirror.

Not good.

Some dark under the eyes, a couple of rogue white hairs at the back.

Possibly caused by the nutjob experiment. Or residual stress related to it.

Fuck.

White hairs already. Three of them. At 22.

Heroic - I'm an old man, Sadia. Go for someone your own age, forget about me.

Pragmatic – Everyone gets older. Who cares? At least it means I've lived.

Sympathetic – These white hairs, I wouldn't change them for anything. These are my pain, they have history in them, each single strand.

I put the brush down and looked at my Japanese eyes, my Japanese nose, my Japanese mouth.

Defeatist – It's okay, I get it. I'm Japanese and you don't like Japanese. I'll leave, don't worry.

Sanguine – It's a face, that's all. And it makes me special, does it not?

Conquer the world – Fuck everyone, there's you and me, and who gives a fuck what kind of face I have? Love is much, much bigger than any of that. You wanna hear some Japanese?

+++

That night, I had the strangest dream.

In it, there was a castle, me as a princess, and a Japanese man climbing up my rope-bridge hair, which was hanging over the side of the castle wall, and when he reached the top, I jumped past him, falling into a go-kart and racing down the ramparts, and there was a Japanese man in another kart, and the alien from *Alien* and Captain Eto in another one, sharing a kart, and the other Japanese man was chasing me all the way down the-

I woke up, jump cut, sweaty, all of it still playing in my head.

Phone said four in the morning.

I turned over and tried to get back to sleep but couldn't. There was something in my head, a question.

'Why is the alien in *Alien* black?'

+++

The next day I sent Sadia a message telling her about my oddball dream then sat back on my bed and waited the whole afternoon for a reply.

Nothing.

Ah, maybe she's sick or something...maybe she's just busy.

Re-strategising a little, I went back on the site and left a message there.

No activity on her profile for the last day and a bit.

No messages from other men.

Reassuring, in a way. At least she hadn't ditched me for someone else.

+++

'There's a burning fire in the room, and I can feel the heat of the flames suggesting themselves at my ankles, my shins, my thighs, and up further, and it's so hot, and so luminous that I can't see anything else of the room, and I'm afraid to shout out, to shout for my mum or my dad or my stepdad, because this fire, this bright, burning fire might climb into my mouth.

A breath. A quick, subtle breath.

I blink and the fire is gone.

I'm not burning.

I'm not anything.'

I read it again and again and again, trying to imagine the feeling of being burnt, and then watched three episodes of *Doctor Who* on *GENTE+* and after that went back and read it seven more times and wondered what she was really trying to say when she wrote about that fire, but I wasn't really thinking that, I was thinking about the message she hadn't sent, and wondered if this was it, if this was the day

she'd finally got bored, or the day another guy finally asked her out over there in Fresno, or the day she-...

Before logging off, I checked my own story online. It wasn't the new one I'd written, that wasn't ready yet, and you needed at least thirty pages before you could put it up on the site. It was the old one, Mark's one. Or mine, technically: *Dream-Fucker*.

I re-read the first chapter and then thought about it in comparison to the burning girl in Sadia's.

Kuso, the difference in quality...the sheer fucking scale of it.

It was like an abyss.

Worse, it was an abyss with no bridge and a whole bunch of critics dressed as crocodiles waiting at the bottom to tell me face to face how shit *Dream Fucker* was.

Yeah, I know that already, crocodile critics.

Really, I do.

She was Ursula Le Guin, I was Ed Wood.

No wonder she'd stopped talking to me.

+++

I drifted from her floating world back into land-locked greyness, instantly sliding out a hand to pick up the phone on the pillow next to me.

No new messages. No emails.

Throwing the piece of shit Japanese tech towards the bottom of the bed [and almost clipping the geriatric VR-home machine], I reached over to the desk and turned on my Japanese-brand laptop.

Strangely, I was still logged on to the site, and it was still fixed on my profile page, so I refreshed and looked at my message box.

Nothing.

Fuck, after two and half days?

I thought about typing out another message, but vetoed myself, deciding it might come across as creepy.

Instead, I threw a football at the wall and caught it.

Did it again, and again, about a thousand times.

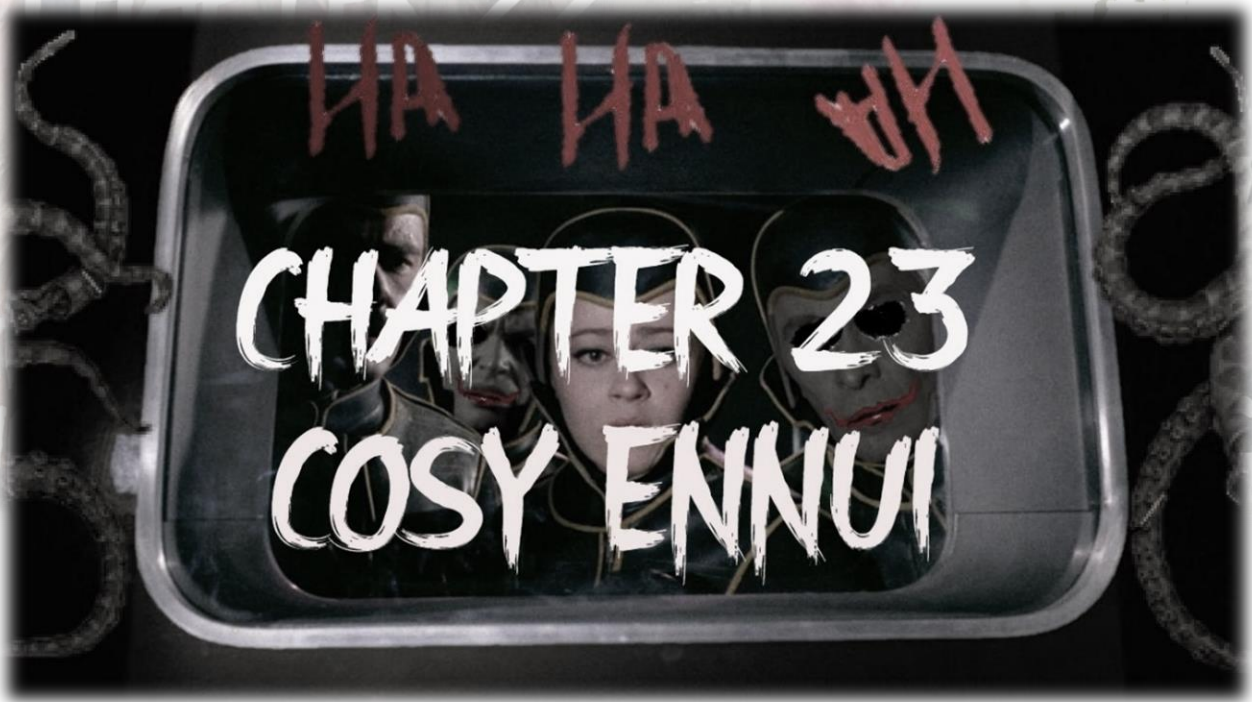
Dad shouted up the stairs, asking if I was conducting an exorcism.

I stopped and checked my inbox again.

Nothing.

Nothing, nothing, nothing.

Sadia, where the king of hell were you?



The next day, my blonde fragment of Californian void still hadn't messaged, so I sent her another message even though it was out of rotation and probably a little bit creepy. In clipped verse, I told her I'd been reading more of her story and that it was the most amazing thing on the site, and at the very end of the message, asked if she was alright, if there was anything she needed or was worried about.

After that, *Planet Dark*.

Comfort nostalgia.

Then BLONDE JAPANESE EMO TOURIST BIG TITS FUCK GYM
INSTUCTOR NO BLUR.

Boredom.

+++

The day perished and still no reply.

I wanted to send another message but didn't.

A third one in a row would kill it stone dead, I knew that.

Instead, I sat in my room all afternoon, online, not writing, just staring blankly at a whole season of *Planet Dark* and every now and then reading her stuff,

especially the thing about the burning girl. It was beautiful. Depressing. Vacant. A portrait of empty death. Maybe it was the dry air in the room, but at one point I cried. Then turned back to *Planet Dark* and went blank again. Then switched to *Elf Serenade* and had a quick wank over the social worker. Fuck this world. Fuck my own artistic output.

+++

Dad called me down for dinner in the evening and asked what I'd been doing up there all afternoon. I told him I was writing and that I'd be done in a few days.

'And then you'll look for a job?'

'Right.'

I didn't tell him about Sadia.

Didn't tell any of them.

It was none of their business.

+++

The next day and the day after that, still nothing.

A whole week and no reply.

I checked her phone status and it was blank, then her Authomaton profile to see if she'd been online at least, but that was frozen too.

Eight days and no activity.

And fifteen unanswered messages from other men.

'You've got a life now, haven't you?' I mumbled to her avatar; the monochrome face looking down at a crumpled leaf in her hand. 'Pretentious fucking witch.'

+++

The next day I got a phone call.

It was the Japanese scientist...the woman, not the weird fake Jamaican guy. She informed me in her robotic voice that my friends were nearly fixed and they'd be reintegrated within the next week.

My friends? Wah, I'd forgotten all about them.

'We also did a minor trim on your manager at the gymn...'

'Ha.'

'Excuse me?'

'Nothing.'

'Is everything okay, young man?' she asked, voice deepening.

'Fine.'

'Excellent. So you've adjusted to your new life. Do you have any plans for your immediate future? Perhaps a new college?'

I hung up.

The fuckers were still watching me, still checking up on their experiment. Fucking science, fucking scientists. They were no better than the rich...or those Mexican guys cutting off other guys' heads...kind of. Well, I guess they weren't that bad. Not bad enough for Jeff Fahey to write a book about them anyway.

Ah, forget it. They're watching, who cares? They can't do anything, not without my consent, and my consent isn't going anywhere near them.

In fact, if they were still lurking around in Liverpool, maybe going to California wasn't such a bad idea after all. I could hide out with Sadia, stay there for a month or two, make them think I'd moved away forever.

The only problem was: no Sadia.

I went back online and checked all possible inboxes she might use to send a message. Maybe I'd given her my other e-mail at one point and forgotten about it?

Nope. Nothing.

The only new message was from some guy telling me to read his book, *Titanic 3: Iceberg Ambush*. Apparently, it wasn't a direct sequel, but a reimagining to an imagined sequel he'd seen in a vision.

I deleted it and refreshed the screen.

Still nothing.

Where the hell was she?

+++

The next week went by hyper-fast. Hyper-real.

I was sure she'd reply to me within that time. She'd probably just gone on holiday somewhere and forgotten to mention it.

But I also knew that if she didn't reply in that time then it was over.

+++

Bored of looking at the posters on my wall, I relocated to the living room, with Dad, Charlie and Billy. As soon as I was comfortable on the couch, Charlie was up and on her way back upstairs.

'She'll come round, son, don't worry,' Dad said, his tone not as soft librarian as it usually was.

'Come round to what?'

'You know, stuff.'

'You mean my face?'

'I mean, stuff.' He stared at my face then sighed. 'She did mention the face actually. Not sure what the problem is exactly, it looks fine to me, but...'

'She doesn't understand why I look Japanese.'

He nodded.

I flicked invisible dust from the couch arm to the floor, deciding it was pointless to get into all this again. The truth was, corrective science didn't seem to work on Charlie, and I was the only one who knew it. Whenever I mentioned it to Dad or Mum or Billy, that I wasn't really Japanese, they just looked at me like I was an eskimo child wearing a trench coat. Pure oddness.

Ah well, maybe Dad was right. Maybe Charlie would just get used to it the natural way. It was the best and only real shot I had.

'You seen this, Mark?'

'Huh?'

'This...'

I blinked methadone style, switching to the filmn playing out on screen. Something set in space, with the spaceship creeping up towards a Pluto cut and paste job. *Void Galaxia?*

Nope, too old, shit CG. And they were already on a base in that one, not cruising in on a ship.

Pluto...space...nothing.

I leaned forward, curious as to how I'd missed a filmn about Pluto, anxious for it not to be shit.

The action cut to the interior and the actors appeared. There was Andi Chopra, with eyeshadow, Captain Eto's lieutenant, mannequin-like, the vampire woman from *Infinite Atom Mall*...clothed.

Ah, *Pluto Fear*. I did know it, though I'd never actually seen it all the way through. Too old, too cheap, too shit. And those plastic fucking aliens...

The filmn continued.

Eto's Lieutenant and Chopra lounged about in a green-filtered lab on the spaceship. They were drinking something, some kind of bootleg stuff, and then the vamp woman came in and told them they were drunk and irresponsible, and the two of them slurred words back at her.

'Great, drunks in space,' said Billy, reaching for the remote.

'It's just started, give it some time,' said Dad, swatting him away.

'Serious...why do they always do drinking scenes this way?'

'What's that?'

'I mean, it's a bit weak. Having actors who aren't really pissed pretending to be pissed, only they can't swear or anything.'

I laughed as Chopra slurred another line right into vamp woman's chest.

'He's not far off...'

'Yeah...but he doesn't even say tits. Or fuck.'

'It's a family filmn, son. They can't push it too far.'

'Obviously, I know that, but...still a bit weak.'

Dad muttered something about impropriety and increased the volume by three bars.

I watched a bit more.

The crew didn't stay in space long, the planet was calling to them with a hypnotically sharp long shot of the Pluto tholins patch. Wah, was it really that red? From a distance, as far as I could recall, it was definitely a kind of red, cos of the tholins effect, but was it that stark?

I took my phone out to check, but got bored typing the first word and went back to the filmn.

The ship was coming in to land, showing more of the topography. Okay, the tholins patch had gone, but the ice wasn't sublimating as the thrusters hit, and for some reason that didn't seem right.

'Why isn't the ice sublimating?' I asked the others.

'Shhh...this is a good bit,' Dad said back, upping the volume another bar.

The scenes on Pluto continued as one of the crew got left behind due to a chipped oxygen tank. They all said goodbye, see you in the next life, and then walked off in separate ways. Across ice that wasn't sublimating. One of them went a little too far and got picked off by a plastic alien, while Chopra and Vampire woman from

Infinite Atom Mall set up a pseudo-tech perimeter around their base site. Then Eto's lieutenant appeared and booted up the generator.

And still the ice didn't sublimate.

'This is wrong...' I muttered, just loud enough to reach my own ears and no one else's.

Warning lights went off and the plastic aliens attacked, bringing down all three of the remaining crew. Chopra revived first, seeing the base site trashed, the generator dead and realizing there was no time to get back to the ship before their air ran out.

'We've got about an hour,' he said, and they all wandered off to prepare psychologically for their inevitable deaths.

Eto's Lieutenant stayed put and chatted with the AI back on the ship, while Chopra and the Vampire Woman decided it was best to go out erotic and attempted sex. Pulling their suits off, they both waited to freeze and choke, whichever came first, but they didn't do either. They just stood there, unfrozen, breathing out CG molecules.

On Pluto.

Actual breathable air.

'The fu-...that makes no fucking sense,' I burst out, practically leaping out of my chair, images of green Martokras and topless commanders sliding into my brain.

'Mark...'

'Breathing air on Pluto...'

'It's the plastic alien effect, kidda,' Billy said, laughing, 'they've got thermal heating in their blood.'

'Don't care, it's fucking stupid.'

'Which part?'

'All of it, every scene on the surface. That...' I pointed at the plastic alien creeping out from behind a rock, tilting its head at Chopra's ass. 'It's ridiculous.'

'I just told you, they're possessed...and it's an Andi Chopra filmn, not a NASA doc.'

'Nope, I'm done.'

'Where you going?' asked Dad, his eyebrows literally bending diagonal.

'Away from this fucking mess.'

I got up and went upstairs, hitting the top of the banister with my fist. I didn't know why I was so angry, it was only space. But for some reason...for some *unknown but deep in my gut* reason I really wanted to hit something.

Possibly sympathetic, my room pulled me in and watched silently as I did tiny circuits, trying not to smack the wall, trying to breathe more like a monk and not a sociopath.

I'm Mark, not a nut. I'm Mark, not a nut. I'm Mark...

I sat down on the bed, unclenched my fists and took a few more breaths. The computerr was still on so I got back up and forced myself down in front of it. I checked my inbox, not with any great hope, and saw that she still hadn't replied.

'Fuck's sake, Sadia...'

+++

That night I couldn't sleep, again.

'Why were there plastic aliens on Pluto?'

'Why were there plastic aliens on Pluto?'

I repeated it so many times I wore myself out and punched the mattress in frustration and blue void anger, telling it there was no sense in any of it, and why did it even fucking matter, I wasn't going to Pluto, it was a filmn, a fucking Disney production, and why couldn't they show that there were plastic aliens on Pluto that could make the air breathable?

Tsukubashi wouldn't do this.

Tsukubashi wouldn't do this.

Tsukubashi wouldn't-
Tsukubashi had read some fucking science.

+++

I woke up in the dregs of the afternoon.
Moon Factory 7 poster. Unread sci-fi books. Dusty VR-home machine.
The usual.
I went online and, even before I checked, I knew there would be no new message for me.
The profile loaded.
I was right.

+++

My eyes merged with the screen.
The screen changed to her profile and I stared at her avatar. Then switched to her book and clicked on it, but as soon as it came up I mouthed *fucking poetry shit* and clicked back out again.

Realist – she's out. You're out. Don't even look anymore.

I went downstairs and found Dad sitting alone in the living room, watching *Doctor Who*. The others were out. I took the middle of the couch and told him I'd finished writing.

'That's great, son. Next stop, superstar.'

'Don't know about that. Superstar with no fans maybe.'

A few scenes of *Doctor Who* passed, extras being attacked by other extras in cobalt blue suits, probably rubber, the doctor yapping away like a lunatic on the finest 80's acid, wide shots of wintered Essex.

'You wanna show me what you've got?' Dad asked, eyes wedged to the screen.

'Still needs editing. Next week maybe.'

'Course, son. Take your time.'

A few more extra deaths, then the end of episode credits.

Doctor Who – Peter Davison.

Tegan Jovanka – Janet Fielding

Nyssa -

'Okay, what about this?' I looked at Dad, smiling like a loon. 'We sit here the whole day and watch *Doctor Who*. No breaks, just pure, uninterrupted *Who*.'

'That was my original plan.'

We laughed.

Slid further down the back of our seats.

Watched the credits end.

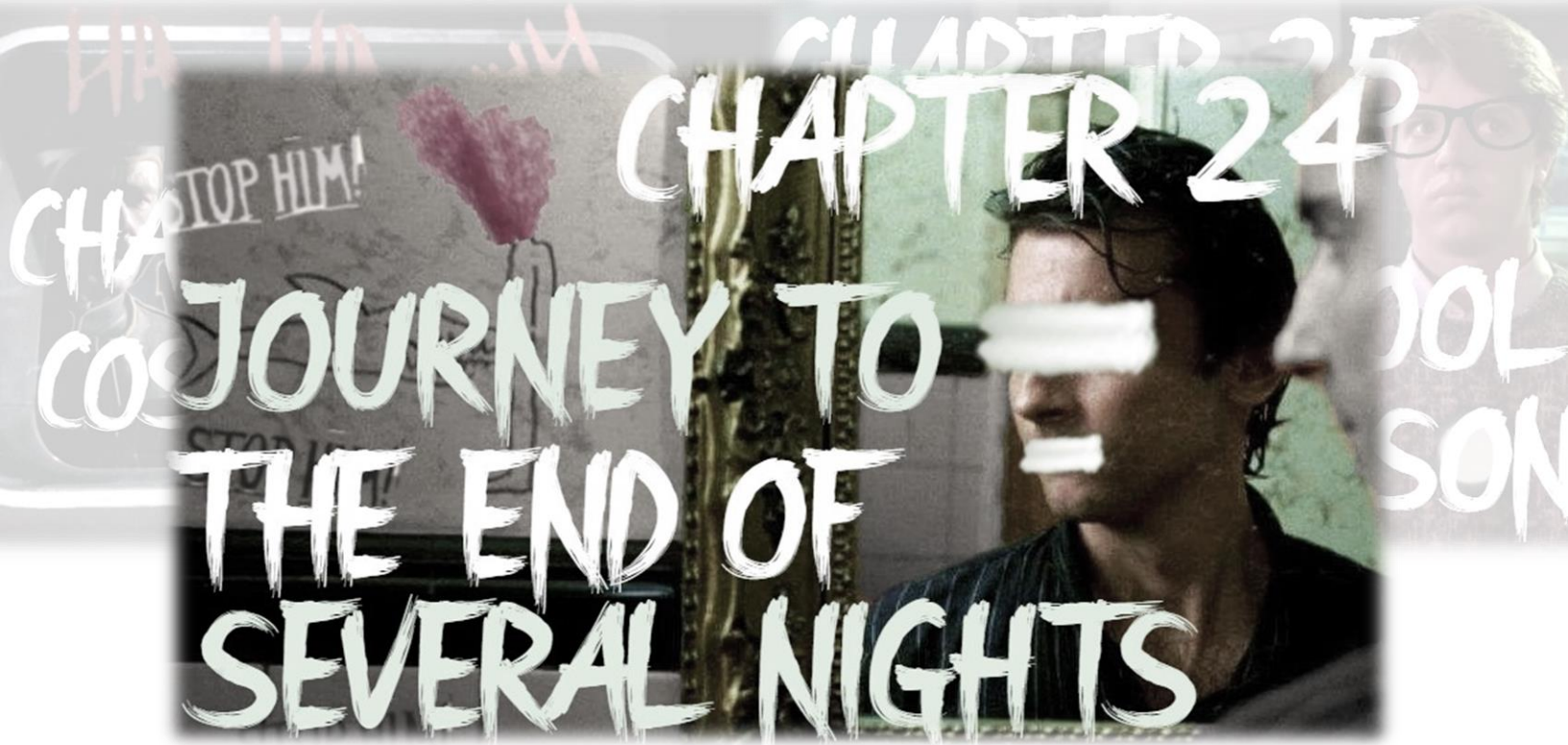
Nodded as the next ones began.

In my head, one thought:

Why was there air on Pluto?

From where?

Who?



We started at *Angry Moborg*.

Barry walked in first and the rest of us followed, nonplussed by the holographic green fish floating two feet above everyone's heads. Just like every other Friday night, there were so many bodies packed in the place that I got a bit lost and couldn't take the same route as Barry; one grubby guy in a *Gundam for Lord Protector* t-shirt refused to budge, even though I told him I was coming through, and when he turned and saw my face, the fucker gave me an Andi Chopra on sunny Pluto look and smirked.

Kasu...

Luckily, there was room round the other side of the Gundam guy's circle of fuckwits, but, as I moved that way, I caught him prodding his friend with a free hand, gesturing for him to hedge back a little so I couldn't get round that way either – fucking snitch - but the friend wasn't quick enough to understand and I was able to sneak past and fuck up his plan. Still in range, I heard the two of them saying something about not letting the nips get comfortable in our fucking city, which was weird...until I remembered what face I had

Motherfucker *kasu*, I thought, but didn't turn back.

Not worth it.

And too cramped to fight in this place anyway.

Pulling my jacket collar up a bit, I located the others hovering over a high table near the back. Barry was already propping his hand up, miming a pint glass, which was a complex Barry signal for me specifically to go to the barr and get the first round. I nodded back and repeated the gesture, then added a twin pair of two fingers, code for him to come and give me a hand with the drinks. Of course, being Barry, he shook his head like a Wraith-Tory down a fucking coal mine then shrugged and started walking anyway.

Looked like the scientists hadn't altered him too much.

Only superficially.

Maybe.

Carving out a spot by the barr, I ordered five pints of something on tap, the nearest one, couldn't see a name, but it didn't matter as the barr guy didn't understand a word I was saying, so I pointed at it, and he spoke back to me, 'one beer, two beer?' I held up five fingers and he nodded, walking away to get the glasses. As I turned, Barry arrived, asking if I'd got the usual shit or something fruity, and I pointed at the beer tap again. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the barr guy looking back over at me, a skinny colleague parked at his shoulder, both of them laughing at something.

Probably the woman in the goomba costume next to me.

Or Barry's gut.

Definitely not my face.

+++

We stayed in *Angry Moborg* for two more rounds before heading out and walking down the street a bit to the *TOP-UP Point*.

There wasn't much of a queue even though we were right in the heart of the city centre, and I waited behind two guys while Barry and the others went into *HAZ Burger* for a piss. Brief thoughts of anarchism, Sadia, blonde pubic hair and aliens in go karts passed through my brain, but none of it stuck; I was too immersed in the facial scanner above the *TOP-UP* point. It didn't appear to be active at all, there were no notification lights, yet everyone put their face near it when ordered to by the machine. Even though they also had to key in their passwords.

Did it actually do anything?

I had no idea, and wasn't really looking for answers anyway.

Just passing time.

While my body rots.

And my brain-

The two guys in front of me finished abruptly and I moved forward, but someone else, a skinny guy, suddenly pushed in from the side. He hummed a shit melody off-key when I told him I was next – fucking *kasu* - and straight out told me to fuck off when I asked him to budge. Fuck off? To a random stranger? He was either good at fighting or good at pretending. Probably the latter, I decided, looking at his stick legs, sinew arms, the stupid fucking back of his grey-white neck, thinking which parts I could break if I started punching.

He put his card in the slot, unfazed.

Okay then.

Let's see how this plays out.

Moving closer, I switched as much as I could to sober mode and evaluated my chances. He was taller than me, but only a little bit, and it was irrelevant anyway cos I was bigger physically, I worked out, my body had some bulk behind it and I wasn't gonna let some fucking skinny cunt take my place when I'd been waiting first.

A taxi driver yelled 'FAAAAARE' in the background as the guy put his face up to the scanner, giving me cover to step in close, get hold of his jacket and push him with a bit more force than intended down onto the pavement. May have been

the shock factor, but he landed clumsy, hard, almost smacking his face on the concrete.

Of course, just like all these little shits, he started moaning instantly.

Didn't care, blocked it out.

Advanced.

Got on top of him and stayed there as he tried to pull himself back up, my forearm against his neck, whispering, 'get up, get the fuck up, coward.'

Unable to wriggle out of my hold, he shouted behind that I was fucking dead, a fucking dead cunt, he was gonna do me off a cliff etc., but he was completely pinned down as the threats spewed out, so it didn't matter much.

After keeping him like that for about a minute, the rage started to sublimate and my brain whispered, what next, *kasu*? Good question. Couldn't hit him cold, that would be psycho behavior, so, instead, I loosened my forearm and allowed him space to get back up. The fucker froze, moaned a bit more then re-booted. Clutched his throat as if I'd snapped the thing, used the wall to maneuver himself into a standing position and then jabbed his free hand at me as Barry and the others came out of *HAZ Burger*.

'Back us up, kid, back us up,' he yelled, adding that the fucking nip – me, apparently - was giving lip and they had to stamp that shit out, stamp me out.

Going with tribe over confusion, Barry replied as calm as one of those Japanese scientists, 'touch him and I'll hydrate your fucking tits off.'

'Do what?'

'You fucking heard.'

The skinny kid realized he was among wolves and ran [surprisingly fast], waiting until he was at the corner past *HAZ Burger* before screaming back that we were all dead cunts.

Brushing down the sleeves of my jacket [which had picked up some dust residue from the pavement], I returned to the *TUP*, where there was still space, and told Barry it was nothing, just some twat giving lip.

‘What happened to Mark the pacifist? Fuck...’

‘He started it.’

‘Thought you were gonna pomelo him.’

‘Nah.’

‘Blood on the pavement, loose teeth...fucking Abe Ferrara shit.’

‘Too public.’

The two other guys in the queue came forward and patted me on the back, saying they were sorry for all that, no, worse, they were embarrassed that a gobby shit like that shared the same city as them. Putting my card into the slot, I said, ‘yeah, I know, I was born here, mate.’

‘Fucking sickening having knob heads like that around every weekend. They should just fuck off, full stop.’

I lined up my face with the scanner, riding out three consecutive warnings of *FACE UNVERIFIED, PLEASE TRY AGAIN* before it finally topped up my card.

‘Shift them all down south,’ the guy added.

‘Yeah, nice idea,’ I replied, trying to shake off the weirdness of not having an officially verified face. Temporarily.

Must’ve been those scientists hacking in.

Or a faulty scanner.

+++

After detaching from our two new friends, we headed over to Bold Street.

13th Colony, the notorious VR barr that some of the local stream stars went to, was a regular haunt, but it seemed too quiet inside, so we kept walking up until we reached the square. It was busier there; they had all the plastic chairs out, people were sitting down and, based on their bobbing face movements, appeared to be having a good time.

Picking the sometimes pretentious but generally okay *Le Bateau* on the far corner, we strolled in and propped up the barr for the first hour, then walked around and talked to a few familiar faces, as well as a few girls, all of them eager to know who I was and what I was doing in Liverpool.

Barry and the others played along, telling her I was Mark's friend from Japan, and Mark was somewhere in Tokyo fingering some Japanese catalogue model, while I was here, lodging in his house, one hundred per cent single. The girls laughed and flirted a little; one of the blonder ones leaning close and telling me my face was fucking beautiful then kissing my ear lobe. Barry leaned in and told her I was a hound-dog and, an hour ago, I'd started on this gobby twat over near *Angry Moborg*, and the kid had run off pissing himself. The girl laughed and said she'd heard Japanese men were tough, and then later, near the toilets, she saw me again and asked if I was really, really tough, and I said, 'yeah, well, I don't just stand there and do nothing.'

'Good, I hate pacifists,' she said, pushing me against the wall and planting herself on my face.

I kissed her back for what seemed like a few minutes, ran a line over her tits, rubbed her a bit, but Barry told me later, at the barr, that I was by the toilets with her for two hours, which I didn't really believe cos Barry was drunk too and how could he tell time any better than I could? Two hours? I would've just taken her home if it was going on that long.

After arguing about it for half an hour and then forgetting about it instantly, we ordered something called *Krsnik* and drank to Japan. Some other guys heard it and came over, saying they'd lived in Japan before. To prove it, one of them spoke to me in basic Japanese and I spoke to him back and we had a kiddie conversation, and then they ordered some shots for us and we all drank to Tokyo and Mainichi porn.

Then our group and the two other guys left and went outside into the square and brought some *Krsnik* with us and it was emptier now so we could sit down and drink. I tried to look at my watch, but it was blurred, so I shifted upwards and

tried to focus on things in the square but that was blurred too, and I asked someone what time it was and they said, 'Neptune time, baby girl.'

+++

I woke up and went downstairs, watched some *Doctor Who* with Dad. Made some coffee, downed some water before drinking the coffee, then took two Panadol for the small army of neurons smacking each other round the inside of my head.

Later, Mum came in and told us Charlie had got stuck at the airport and was coming back home. 'She had a panic attack, so be nice, okay?'

She came back two hours later. We all smiled and asked if she was alright, but she didn't answer, just looked at me then walked off, straight up to her room.

+++

We were in a pocket barr near Matthew Street, some place Barry had heard of, but the rest of us hadn't, and the others had already told him they'd meet up later and then we'd all go to one of the clubs, maybe the *Razzy*, maybe the *Krazy Housse*, we'd decide later, so me and Barry sat at a table by ourselves, drinking from three in the afternoon until ten at dark, with Barry telling me it was normal I had a Japanese face, and he didn't really get why people kept staring and asking about it, but then after a while, and another couple of drinks, he changed his mind and said, 'actually, it is a bit odd, mate, isn't it?'

+++

The others turned up around eleven, meeting us at another barr in Matthew Street, I could never remember the name, but it was one of those places with a basement and it was always packed, and tonight it was extra packed and a rhizome bitch to get to the barr, but Barry and me didn't really care cos we'd already had a

shitload to drink and it was the others who'd just come out who were desperate to get to the barr and get some confidence inside them.

'Yaaa desperation of sober twats when they see how much craic everyone else is having,' Barry said into my ear while the others were pushing their way across the floor.

'Our lovely craic,' I replied, trying to pick up my bottle and almost knocking it off the table.

After an hour, the others came back over, saying they'd managed to get three drinks down, which wasn't enough, and we should leave so they could go to *VISH MART* and get some quick beers before hitting the *Krazy Housse*.

Me and Barry agreed and followed them out, and then quick as a flash we were in the queue for something, and I asked Barry where we were and he said in the queue and that was about all I got as he was already dancing to some kind of music, maybe the beeping shit I could hear from inside.

Another flash and we were inside and I was standing near a pool table watching two guys I didn't know play pool. They weren't very good but I didn't say anything, just looked around between shots and tried to focus on who and what was around me, but no one would stay still so I went up to one of the booths and sat down and no one in that booth said a word so I got up again and walked over to the stairs and up onto one of the dance floors, and my legs buckled a little on the last step, but I managed to hold myself together and keep moving, telling my brain I wasn't drunk, I was a master of illusion, and then thought, 'where's Barry?' because I really needed to tell him I was Mandrake, the master of illusion, and I knew he'd understand.

But he wasn't at the barr or on the dance floor, and he wasn't near the pool tables either. Toilets? No sign of him there. Nothing. No sign of him anywhere. Quelling the sudden urge to get out and head home, patch into *Moon Factory 7*, chase around some girl called Tomomi, I moved back to the middle floor, Barry's favourite,

and went round the whole perimeter until, finally, I spotted him grinding up against a pillar on the podium.

‘Fucking Hellraiser 3, brother,’ slurred out as, ‘Kin Hazer Ee,’ and I tried to walk over there to say it into his neck, but my legs were feeling weak again, so I swayed a little on the spot and sat down on the edge of the podium, trying to block out the nuclear drum beat coming from everywhere, every fucking point of the pentagram star type thingy. Then a guy was standing over me, didn’t know who, but he seemed to know me, and he leaned down to my ear and said something, couldn’t hear it properly, but I saw his face and he looked constipated.

‘Kasu,’ I mumbled under my breath, attempting to get up and move away, maybe find the others, but something grabbed me, and I turned and saw it was him, the fucker was latched on my arm and yapping again, but the exploding drum was yapping louder so I could only catch a few words.

‘Take you to the fucking airport,’ he repeated, louder, and I tried to shrug him off, but he was strong, and yapping again, closer to me, ‘I’m taking you to the fucking airport, nip, putting you on a fucking nip plane, sending you back to the fucking nip homeland.’

I looked at him and his scrunched eyebrows and then the general surroundings. Some of the nearby shapes were staring, while others were still making drunken triangles with their hands, and no one did anything as he pushed me hard in the chest, not even a token *hey*. Somehow I managed to stay on my feet and at that point, the only thing I could picture clearly were his scrunched eyebrows and how much I wanted to smear them into the podium, hopefully his face too.

Podium face motherfuck-...

I turned awkward and said something about hitting him with a fat airport, then swung hard and vague, and it kind of felt like I got some of him, but not enough, I could see he was still on his feet, which meant the next thing would be a counter-swing.

Moving my legs into a flexible defensive stance was the logical move, but those legs were wobbling and my eyes couldn't really see straight and, honestly, I just wanted to sit down again, preferably away from this beep music and all these-

Something smacked against my head, pulling the floor up towards my shoulders, sliding in Sadia, naked in a bathtub, wiping me with a sponge, telling me the guy had probably got beaten up by a Japanese guy before. Or really liked driving foreigners to airports. One or the other.

Lights came back on and Sadia vanished.

Didn't know how or when but my body was slouched down at the side of the dancefloor, with the drums turned off, and Barry next to me saying, 'mate, this fucking place,' over and over, with a blood-stained tissue in his hand.

+++

It was almost dark when I woke up.

Huh? That fast?

I checked the clock and saw early afternoon numbers. Confused, I got up, looked outside and saw that it wasn't really that dark, it was just a miserable day.

Planet Liverpool.

Grey like Ceres.

Filmed by old-age Tarkovsky.

Stumbling zombie-like downstairs, I made my usual cup of no milk coffee and told dad I was going out later that night. He asked me about the editing. I watched the surface of the coffee and told him it was coming along. He asked about the marks on my face, I told him I'd tripped and hit my head on a Nazi.

'Huh?'

'Never mind.'

'You got hit by a Nazi?'

'Forget it, dad.'

Charlie came down in the evening and tried to have dinner with us. She'd been in her room for almost a week now, only coming out when she needed the bathroom.

No one mentioned this, we just smiled, same as the last time.

It didn't matter.

She sat down for about two minutes, looked at the TV, looked at me, screamed and ran back upstairs.

+++

Barry answered the door in a Richard Pryor mask and shook his head, asking what had taken us so long to get there.

One of the others said it was his fault, he didn't understand the roads in the area and the signs were all shit and needed replacing, to which Barry responded with a curt 'shut the fuck up' and left the door half open. Didn't know what the others did, but I followed him in, through the hallway and the kitchen, where he tossed me a can, and then out into the garden, where he turned, threw off the mask, lit up and asked what the plan for the night was.

'Bold Street,' I said, miming a smoking pose.

'Should try some different barrs this time.'

'Then not Bold Street.'

He passed over a cigarette and a light and we stood out there for another hour or so, the others apparently elsewhere. The gym was first up, whether or not I was gonna go back and grovel. I said I wasn't and asked him back if he thought I should.

'I wouldn't, mate.'

'Then I won't.'

'It was a decent job though.'

'Not really.'

'I mean, it seemed decent. From the outside.'

‘Nope.’

Later, on the way into the City Centre, he leaned in close to my ear and asked what I was gonna do next.

‘Huh?’

‘What’s your life-plan, Marky-Mark?’ he repeated, louder, blowing smoke out the window.

‘Don’t know.’

‘Architecture?’

‘Join the local gym maybe. Huh?’

‘Dogging old Willy Fogg?’

‘Yeah.’

‘What, dogging him?’

‘That. Exactly.’

I didn’t bother telling him about the writing, cos then he’d ask to see it, and I’d be forced to show him *Lunar Crone*.

+++

The taxi spat us out and I had a moment where I just didn’t want to be there at all, followed by the thought of going home and checking Sadia’s profile again, re-reading our old messages, but it soon passed.

Then we were in another barr, nondescript, drinking *Krsnik* shots by the outside window, talking to some people we vaguely knew.

Time moved on.

Faces seemed younger.

Conversations happened around me, beyond me.

Sadia...trapped in an alternate dimension...waiting for me to stop fucking around and come find her

is what my brain kept saying, in flawless Japanese,

but I refused to believe it.
She abandoned me.
Not me her.

+++

Towards the end we saw the guys from the other barr, the ones a week ago who adored Japan. We pulled them over, ordered more *Krsnik*, toasted to Ko Shibasaki, chatted about *Quarter-Life*, *Pluto 2280*, the pointlessness of private VR servers in city centre barrs, but it wasn't the same this time; they were bored, we were bored, and I wasn't feeling anything from the *Krsnik*, so I told Barry we should go.

'Nah, mate, too soon to quit.'

'It's half eleven.'

'Way too soon.'

'I'm tired.'

'Try another place, see what pans out.'

Deferring to him [to avoid a drunken hissy fit], we left the Japan guys and went up the road to another barr, a place we'd been to before, and drank some more *Krsnik* and stayed there for forty long existential minutes until Barry turned to me, finally, yawned like a velociraptor, and slurred, 'I'm done, mate.'

+++

I woke up and saw Charlie standing over me, head up near the ceiling.

There was a hockey stick in her right hand.

I asked cold what she was doing and she told me I wasn't real.

'What?'

'Fake. Not real.'

I tried to whisper that it was me, her brother Mark, but she kept saying it wasn't, it wasn't, cos Mark was in a Japanese lab somewhere.

'Okay, maybe you should just put the-...'

'Faaaaaaake!'

She brought the hockey stick down, hard.

Somehow, with a sixth, seventh, eighteenth sense, I guessed it was coming and moved a few inches to the side, just enough to avoid having my head mashed into the pillow.

Activating survival mode, I seized her ankles and threw her off the bed, then leapt on the arm that was still gripping the hockey stick.

We wrestled, struggled, screamed at each other.

And then stopped, exhausted.

'Not Mark,' she mumbled, crawling back out into the corridor, leaving me alone with the hockey stick.

+++

Later that morning, dad came in and said Charlie was having real problems and that it probably wasn't me, but at the moment it seemed that way to her. I asked if it was because of my face but, as usual, he didn't seem to understand what I meant. But I knew. Whatever those scientists had done, the spell was breaking.

+++

We were sitting in one of the bars off Bold Street, a recording studio *The Beatles* used, and then *The La's* in the 80s, and *Canto Cave Man* in the 20's, and Barry was telling us about the GENTE+ stars he'd seen lately.

'They're all at *13th Colony*,' he said, spitting on my neck, 'and they're always trashed. Even the tall, blonde one from *Not That Way JoJo*. Serious, if you go over to

them in the correct manner, ask them the right questions, the right way, then there's a pretty good chance you could fuck one of them.'

I drank my pint, something Balkan I'd never heard of, and told him I wasn't interested in *GENTE+* stars, and he laughed, saying I was full of shit, and what *was* I interested in then?

'Recently,' I answered, looking up at the *Canto Cave Man* poster on the wall, 'nothing much.'

'What about that internet girl?'

'Evaporated.'

'No more messages?'

'She's not even online, mate. Doesn't answer anyone.'

'Fuck. Ghosted.'

'Don't even care now anyway. Bigger things to worry about.'

'No job?'

'Bigger.'

'No dick?'

'What?'

'Dada moment, sorry. What bigger things?'

Vetoing the idea of throwing my drink in his face, I told him about Charlie and how everything was fucked up for her at the moment, and the whole mess seemed to give some perspective, the persistent feeling that going out all the time was starting to nullify me as a human being.

Looking blankly at the table, Barry drank half his Balkan pint and said we just needed to hit different bars, meet new people, and then it'd seem new again, and I said, 'yeah, you're probably right, mate,' but it didn't sound convincing at all.

+++

An hour later, we walked into *13th Colony* and poked around a bit, but there were no *GENTE+* stars in there, or even *Hey Muon* stars, so Barry said, fuck this, if there's none here let's get the fuck out and hit something with a bit of class.

On the way back out, we heard the two women in front talking about a white dwarf movie star called Nick Stahl, saying he was somewhere nearby and instead of hard-lining the ultra-private VR servers, or the spiral clubs, he was slumming it in the locals.

Outside, Barry said, 'see, Nick Stool, somewhere nearby.'

'He's a guy though, mate.'

'Guy, girl, raccoon, doesn't bother me.'

'Do you even know who he is?'

'Course, *Terminator: Autobahn* guy, *Intelligent Koala Farm...*'

'Sentient.'

'That bitch on Pluto, ice alien thing...'

'*Dead Bitch On Pluto.*'

Barry clamped a fleshy hand on my shoulder and said, 'nah, exactly, sentient, dead bitches, doesn't matter, we go where the night takes us, poncho villa,' which made me laugh for some reason, and I knew I shouldn't but I couldn't help telling him the night was not sentient and couldn't take us anywhere, and that shut him up for a while as we walked up the road to the next barr, checking behind bins and lamp posts for white dwarf movie star Nick Stahl.

+++

Barry stayed in the gravestone-like seat, staring at the two orange-looking women on the table next to us, while I got up and went to the barr.

Waiting for the drinks guy to serve me, I killed time by reading the Italian titles on the old giallo posters above the spirits rack.

LA CODA DELLO SCORPIONE.

PROFONDO ROSSO.

LA DAMA ROSSA UCCIDE SETTE VOLTE.

When the drinks guy finally noticed me, I ordered two bottles of local made stuff, and, as he was clipping the lids off, looked back at the posters and saw that the text was now in Japanese.

What the-...

Turning to ask the drinks guy if he saw it too, I reeled backwards when I saw a Japanese guy staring at me, holding out the two beers I'd ordered.

'Watch it,' said the guy behind me in flawless Japanese.

I swung round to apologise and instead just said 'ah' as the whole barr was now Japanese; the faces, the words, the exit sign above the door, the Hegel quote on the window.

Feeling my heart about to go supernova, I turned my back on the Japanese mass hallucination and focused on the posters. Not Katakana. Not Katakana. Yes. Thank gods. The text was Italian again. And when the drinks guy told me the price of the beers, his words were in English.

'Okay,' I said back, card staying in my hand.

'I'm gonna need to scan that,' he said, gesturing at it.

'Right. Payment.'

Holding the card out with a slightly shaky hand, he ignored it and took the one that had appeared beside me instead. Pre-empting my inevitable *the fuck?*, a voice spoke near my ear. 'Drinks on me, dude.'

I turned and saw a tall, white guy, or a tall, tan guy, middle-aged, American maybe, smiling like an *out and proud* psychopath. *Hey, aren't you Nick Stahl?* sailed through my brain, but it was too late to say it out loud as he'd already picked up the drinks and was taking them over to the table, where Barry was waiting with his gob stretched open.

When we had both settled, Barry slapped the table like he'd just won a poker hand and said, 'fuck me, mate, you're really here, aren't you?'

‘In the flesh.’

‘Nick Fucking Stool. Unbelievable.’

+++

A surprisingly young Nick Stahl leaned into my side and told my neck he liked to keep away from the louder barrs, and I nodded and said, ‘yeah, makes sense, I guess.’

Barry overheard and said, ‘fuck that, mate, I’d be where the women are, hoovering up all prime muff in the area,’ but Stahl ignored him and stayed close to me, saying more quietly this time, ‘dude, you know what I mean, don’t you?’

Finishing his drink, Barry got up and told us he was gonna walk around for a bit, and I said, ‘don’t go too far, yeah?’

‘No chance, mate, I’m fucking anchored to a movie star. Gonna see what I can reel in ancillary style.’

When Barry was out of earshot, Stahl shifted closer, with his arm around the back of the gravestone seat. As he got more comfortable, his hand shifted, brushing several times against the edge of my shoulder.

I looked at him while drinking my beer, at his build specifically. He was a bigger guy than I remembered him being in his movies, taller and stronger, and oddly young-looking considering he had to be close to sixty years old. And now his hand was stroking my shoulder.

Kuso, was he coming on to me?

What should I do?

Fuck him?

I took another swig of my drink, confused, aroused, wondering if it was the Japanese part of me who was attracted to men, or the Mark part? Was this even attraction? I’d dreamt about fucking ED-209 before, didn’t mean I wanted to physically do it. Did it?

Realising I'd been sipping my beer for over a minute, I shifted away from his hand and asked what the hell he was doing there.

'Chance,' he replied, eyes seemingly outlining my face.

'Pure chance,' I muttered, looking at the other table.

'Hint of intention too.'

'Really...'

'The real question is, what *the hell* are you doing here?'

'Me?'

'In a dead end town like Liverpool.'

'Yeah, I'm still trying to figure it out, I guess. Lot of things have happened recently...tough things...kind of hard to make a concrete plan.'

He leaned in close again, the oddly purple dots in his eyes fixed on my Japanese face, and asked, 'how's the writing arc, Keni Cat?'

+++

In the taxi, Stahl said I was a pretty awesome guy for letting him stay at my house, and he guessed it was a little weird, but not that weird as it was the journey to the end of the night and things like this always happened in the midst of that kind of insanity.

'Besides, it's not technically your house.'

'Sorry?'

'You haven't always lived in it, is what I'm saying.'

I stayed with the window, nodding once, wondering how he knew so much about me. Or gave the impression of knowing so much about me.

After a few minutes of silence, punctuated by the taxi driver's weird choice of music [sounded like Mongolian throat gargling], I asked him head on if he knew any Japanese scientists, or if he thought it was weird that no one else in my family looked Japanese.

The taxi driver looked at me through the windscreen mirror, puzzled.

'I've never seen your family,' replied Stahl, staring outside at the communal estates passing by.

'Yeah, good point.'

'And I don't know any scientists.'

'Me neither,' I lied.

+++

I collapsed without dramatics on the couch and asked Stahl if he was interested in watching a bit of who.

Parking himself on Charlie's usual chair, he looked at the blank TV screen and slowly filtered out a *what*.

'The Who man, Doctor of Who.'

He closed his eyes, muttering, 'oh.'

Taking that as a firm *yes*, I grabbed the remote and loaded up *GENTE+*, then honed in fast on the *Doctor Who* icon before he could get sight of the other choices. I didn't know which episode it was exactly, but I knew the Doctor, it was Pertwee, Sean Pertwee. No, wait, it was Sean's dad, not Sean...Jon.

I closed and opened my eyes, too slow to be called blinking, each time capturing a different scene.

The Doctor was faffing around in the countryside. Then the Cybermen were walking slowly out of the sea. Then they were in balsa wood houses killing pensioners. Then a factory manager was scolding a worker for wearing the wrong overalls. Then the overalls were...

+++

I woke up in the dark, uneasy, waiting for my eyes to adjust.

When they eighty per cent had, I saw that I was in my room, deep under the duvet, with a human-shaped silhouette moving around nearby.

Wah, it was him.

Nick Stahl.

Didn't he have to sleep?

Keeping the duvet tight and discreet around my face, I watched him roam around my own bedroom, opening things, saying *keuso* when it wasn't what he wanted, and then, finally, picking up my computerr.

At this point, his survival radar must've kicked in as he turned sharply and looked right at me.

I had no choice but to sit up and ask what he was doing.

'Insanely bored, dude,' he replied, accent oddly unamerican until the *dude*.

'Sleep?' I suggested, gesturing towards the other side of my bed.

Ignoring my nudge, he turned on the computerr.

My eyes resealed for a moment, and when I opened them again he was sitting on the edge of the bed next to me, asking something, but I couldn't quite hear so I rubbed my eyes, adjusted my leg position and mumbled, 'what?'

'This all you've done?'

I squinted at the computerr and saw the white of a page, and...*keuso*, that thing. My abandoned opus. Well, at least it wasn't *Lunar Crone*.

'Is this all the writing you've done?' he repeated, losing the accent again.

'Chapter two is in there somewhere, but it's not good,' I answered, and that's about all I could manage as my voice sounded like it was coming out of a machine a thousand miles away.

Stahl shook his head and turned the computerr off.

'What's going on?' I asked, pulling myself higher up the bed.

'Thought you would've been further along by now.'

'Along what?'

He rubbed his hand along the top of the duvet, missing my thigh by the smallest of margins. ‘When did you leave Japan, dude?’

‘You know about that?’

‘I thought it was a few months already, but looking at this, maybe not. More like a few weeks, right?’

‘Did I tell you?’

‘Fuck, it is. Undershot again.’

‘How do you know I was in Japan?’

He whistled, quite a skilled one, and said he should’ve listened to the tyrant hologram, even though she was annoying and had made her case poorly.

‘Err...hologram?’

‘Yeah. Assta. Holo-Witch. Fucking hassling me non-stop.’

‘Okay. This is getting a bit weird.’

I lifted the duvet off and was about to get out of bed when, without any sign of actual physical movement on his part, he grabbed hold of my arm and guided me gently back down to the pillow.

‘You should go back to sleep, Keni-cat,’ he said, voice softer than before, and, as I caught the purple dots in his eyes, I felt that he was right, I probably should sleep, and my legs thought he was right too as they refused to move, so I turned on my pillow and drawled out in what I hoped were words that I’d ask him the *how did you know hologram* stuff again in the morning, when the light of sun was about, and my brain was working good and things were

lighter and sunny and-

CHAPTER 25

LIVERPOOL TO MOON PRISON

Dad came into the living room and I introduced him to white dwarf oddball Nick Stahl. They both gave the tiniest of nods and that was it. Dad asked for a word in private so I left Stahl with an episode of *Doctor Who* and followed the tired breathing noises into the front living room.

'He's not staying,' I said, pre-empting the inquisition.

'Son...'

'Or not tonight anyway. Maybe another hour or two on the couch. I don't know.'

Dad turned to the window, a post-*Solaris* breath at me or the bike repair shopp opposite.

'What's wrong?'

Breath and a sigh.

'Dad?'

One final exhale and it came out: Charlie was really bad. Not only did she refuse to believe I was real, but she also suspected I was a fear demon from ancient Japan. I asked if I should go up and see her, but he said no, I should leave.

'Leave where?'

'Here.'

'No, I mean...where do I go? Barry's?'

He told me I should vanish for a while, use the money I had saved up in the fund and go somewhere foreign.

'You mean...far away?'

'I mean you should go abroad, son. Just for a little while. Until Charlie gets back on her feet.'

'On her feet?'

'You know what I mean.'

'But...this isn't fair. I'm not a fear demon.'

'Please, Mark.'

'I'm not...'

'I know, but...Charlie...she's not good, she needs time away from-...'

'What? Her brother the monster?'

He nodded, eyes going left to a stain on the wall.

I asked him when I was supposed to leave and he muttered, 'now would be best, son. Today.'

'But Dad...'

He put his hand on my shoulder, a little too tight.

'Please, son. She needs this.'

I folded my arms, trying to restructure this whole thing with Charlie as the fear demon and me as the good guy, but it wouldn't stick. No matter what she thought of me, she was still my sister. 'Alright,' I said, unfolding my arms, 'as you've already decided it anyway, I'll go. Today.'

I walked back into the living room but didn't sit down. I couldn't, it wasn't my furniture anymore. It wasn't even my house.

Nick Stahl, eyes fixed on the Doctor, told me I should come to the States with him.

'Sorry?'

'You *are* leaving, aren't you?'

I looked back at the open door, trying to figure out if it was possible to eavesdrop on another room from this one. Didn't seem likely, but he clearly knew somehow.

'So come with me to the States,' he added, picking up the toast I'd made for him. 'I can get two seats on the next flight, if I get an affirmative right now.'

'The US...why?'

'Because it's that time, dude.'

'But I don't know anyone there. What would I do?'

He ate some of the toast, dropping crumbs on the floor.

'There's always the girl, Keni-Cat.'

+++

The taxi took me away from my ex-housse and past all the roads I'd walked down at some point in my life. Some of them I hadn't, but I knew their names. Had a vague sense of them.

Seated adjacent was my new friend and apparent magician, Nick Stahl. Somehow capable of conjuring up two tickets for a flight taking off for the US in less than three hours. Without taking out his card either.

'Don't even think of trying to pay me back,' he'd said, after re-pocketing his phone.

'No, I have to.'

'That qualifies as thinking. Which I just told you not to do.'

'But...'

'Consider it a gift. From a generous and extremely underrated movie star.'

At that point, I'd relented.

Mainly cos his pupils were glowing purple.

Not another word, they seemed to be telling me.

It took forty-five minutes to get out to the airport. For most of the way there, we said nothing to each other. I couldn't describe my feelings. All I could say was there were still a few episodes of *Doctor Who* I'd wanted to watch, and I told myself that wherever I went, the first thing I'd do was sign in to *GENTE+*.

+++

In the Departures Hall, Stahl started into a monologue. Didn't catch all of it, but what I did hear was quite strange. He talked about home and what it meant, how many countries you had to visit or live in before you lost sense of what home really was. 'The total,' he declared, 'is seventeen. Once you've existed in that many countries, the concept of home is relinquished. Murdered. Atomised. Eviscerated. Other death verbs. Or maybe it's sixteen. Is it? No, seventeen. Definitely seventeen.'

Couldn't say I agreed, but speaking didn't seem that appealing, so I left it alone.

We ordered some burgers and a soft drink and he continued the rhetoric.

This time it was even stranger. He asked me to imagine what it would be like to be really old, like eight-thousand or something. I laughed, but he told me he was serious.

'Eight-thousand years old, imagine it, dude. After all that time, after eight-thousand years on this planet, what would you be doing with yourself?'

I laughed again.

'Laughing?'

'Sorry. I don't know. You're-...it's a weird question.'

That seemed to confuse him as he gave up on the hypotheticals and bit into his burger, taking half of it in one go.

+++

On the plane, I skimmed through a film magazine I'd bought at the airport. When that got boring, I switched to the *Big Brain Bakunin* archive on my phone; most of it was social theory or political science, supposedly in my wheelhouse, but I swerved all that and clicked on the film-related stuff. Like this one:

Die Hard and the Comfort of Crisis by some guy starting with Z.

Didn't look that tough, despite BBB tagging it as rigorous philosophy.

I took a shallow breath, soaked in the first few pages.

Apparently McClane was a misogynist and fought for private wealth. Hans Gruber was both the end and the beginning of capitalism. The Nakatomi Plaza wasn't a plaza, it was a symbol of Debordian malaise.

Mystified, I read on.

Next to me, Stahl sat shrine-like in something akin to a trance. Didn't even respond to the flight attendants when they asked what food he wanted, and I had to lean across and do his seatbelt for him.

Then, after two hours, he rebooted with an abrupt elbow spasm and asked what I was reading.

I scrolled back up to the title and mispronounced, 'Žižek.'

'Ha...'

'What?'

'Phlegm-Lord Slavoj Žižek.'

'You know him?'

'In a roundabout way.'

'You met him?'

He shrugged.

'You didn't?'

He looked at the screen with the map and the little airplane icon moving over it. I waited for an answer, but nothing came.

'Okay...' Going back to the essay, I tried to rehash some of what I'd read. 'Don't know that much about him, but he seems pretty deep.'

No response.

'I mean, not super deep, but...what he says about *Die Hard*...I've seen it ten, twenty times and I never thought about the whole attack on capitalism thing. Just thought it was McClane against some cold German guys.'

Stahl turned, spat out, 'forget *Die Hard*,' then demanded to know why I wasn't writing anything.

'What do you mean?'

'Dude, you've got like, what, twelve free hours? Why the fuck aren't you writing?'

'Write what?'

'Anything, dude. Whatever's camped in your head.'

'I don't know...nothing really.'

'*Kuso*, you don't know? Nothing? Pure fucking laziness, dude. Look around, observe life details, remember stuff. Pick one of the above and run with it. Or just do what Barthelme used to do.'

'Who?'

'Barthelme. Donny Barthelme. Dude, you're a writer and you don't know Barthelme?'

'I'm not-...I didn't ever say I was a writer.'

'Fuck that. Barthelme's-...the guy was a pioneer. Wrote whatever hazy shit came into his head. Which is what you should do.'

'But...how do I do that?'

Sighing like he was genuinely irritated, Stahl rifled through the paraphernalia in the seat pocket, dropping half of it on my feet. Finally, he picked up my film magazine and flicked through that instead.

'Okay. I see. This is all rubbish.' He chucked the magazine on my lap. 'What else you got in the bag?'

'Nothing.'

'You must have something...books, mags, porn.'

'One or two books.'

'Show me.'

I couldn't be bothered pulling the bag all the way out from under the seat, but the eyes he was looking at me with...not psychotic exactly, but they were intimidating enough to spark some level of obedience.

Reaching down with token grumbling, I lifted up the bag and pulled out one of the sci-fi books I'd taken out from the unii library.

'Mysterious Doctor Satan // Catch Martone.'

I showed him the name on the cover, but he didn't appear to recognise it.

'Author's not that famous,' I added, attempting to dampen expectations.

'What's it about?'

'Err...a mysterious doctor.'

'Called Satan?'

'Possessed by him. I think. Haven't actually got that far yet.'

Clearly losing patience, he grabbed the book and sped through, stopping on one of the pages near the back. I'd only read the first quarter of the book, up to Chapter Five, so I wasn't sure what was so fascinating. Maybe the bit about the Kenyans, where they escape the gala cube and collide accidentally with the fragmented tissue salesman.

'Dude, this is not it,' he whispered, jabbing the page with his thumb and then throwing the whole book down at my bag.

'Sorry?'

He mumbled, 'this is what you need to write about,' then disappeared under his seat for a few seconds, shooting back up with a new book stamped *Moon Prison // Tyson Bley*.

'You mean...you want me to review it?'

'No, I want you to read it, dude. Think about it, learn from it...there's some pretty good shit here...pretty direct too, no prancing around in coffee shops or college campuses.'

'*Moon Prison...*' I repeated, tilting my head to try to read the back.

'Though their description of Neptune is a bit off. But you don't know about that either, so skip it. Focus on the other parts.'

'Which ones?'

'What?'

'The parts I should focus on...where are they?'

'Jesus, I'm not your night nurse. Look them up yourself. Fuck's sake.'

'Okay. I'll have a look.'

'And write something.'

'Yeah, I am. I will.'

I eventually managed to wrangle the book from him and, turning slightly away from his seat, started my search for the *good* bits. The cover had a picture of the titular prison, surrounded by fields of ice, and a close up of a Chinese guy without a helmet, so no clues there. And the first chapter intro seemed to be just laying out the rules of the prison. Maybe if I skipped to the last page and worked backwards...

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Moon Prison [Page 422]

+

Tetris blinked.

It was hot, hotter than usual. He wasn't sure but it felt like a moist kind of hot, swamp fire, sweating crocs.

He looked around and saw humans in Dali costumes.

What the...

Glancing down, he saw that he was sitting in a man-sized pot of warm water. There was no shirt on his chest, no trousers or pants.

'Tetris Chan,' one of the humans announced. It sounded like a man, but it was hard to be sure as he was wearing a Virginia Madsen mask.

'Yes?'

'You have failed in your mission.'

'Excuse me?'

'Do not pretend you have forgotten.'

'But I'm not-...I don't know what you're talking about. My name is Tetris Chan, I run a chain of industrial prisons on seven different moons. I'm incredibly wealthy.'

The figure in the Virginia Madsen mask looked at the others, most of whom were disguised as people Tetris didn't recognize, then turned back to him.

What the hell was going on here?

Was this still Titan?

Had Glum Bosco tricked him again?

'It is irrelevant if you remember or not. The punishment remains the same. Death by hot water followed by sex using your skin as a condom.'

'What?'

'I said death by hot water.'

But...you can't. I'm Tetris Chan. I run a chain of industrial pri-...'

'No, you are a witch from the Daqaar Nebula. We are your comrades. But it seems you have chosen to forget us.'

'I'm not a witch, I'm a people. A person. A human being.'

'Wrong, Witch-Face.'

The water got hotter. Tetris' skin started to melt. Somehow, it wasn't as painful as he'd expected.

'Wait...is there any way out of this? I have money.'

The person in the Virginia Madsen mask stared back at him, unblinking.

'No,' they replied, cold.

+

'Here, this will help.'

I looked to the side, at an empty seat.

'Back here.'

Following the voice, I saw Stahl leaning over the seat behind his. In his left hand was a pen with the airline name on it, the nib pointing roughly at my neck.

'Now?'

'Now...within the next hour, the next day, whenever.'

'But I don't know what to write yet.'

He came back, planting himself down in his seat. 'Then make notes. Or an outline. Sci-fi but not dogmatic, okay. I hate those kinds of books. And no zaum poetry either.'

'Don't know. Feels like I'm forcing it a bit.'

'That's the best way, dude. Brute force.'

'I guess...'

He put the pen in my hand and closed it into a fist.

'Go.'

+++

A little while later, when he was visibly asleep, I put *Moon Prison* face down on my lap and tried writing something.

A basic outline, mostly.

Of whatever junk was floating around my brain:

YELLOW ALIEN BLOB

A yellow alien blob absorbs people and forces them to do missions.

Takes them back to a moon in the Kuiper Belt.

Triton? Charon?

Blob uses telepathy, and sometimes an electric bird to translate its thoughts. It's unclear for most of the story if it's a good blob or not.

Main character got kidnapped somewhere weird.

Brothel?

Not weird enough.

Romanian countryside – he’s looking for vampires at the start, gets attacked by the vamp and then the blob intervenes.

Blob is pansexual, absorbing = fucking?

Chapter 1 – main guy in Romania, gets in trouble with vamp or wolves, Blob saves him, absorbs/fucks him.

I stopped doing notes and made a run on writing out the first chapter. It was tough, really tough. So tough I gave up for an hour and patched into the most basic VR I’d ever encountered [outside of Phase 1 tech]; a desert island with all the characters either one-note NPCs or the other passengers on the plane. Well, those who felt the urge to play a VR about a plane crashing on a desert island. Which, it turned out, was around eight.

Apart from one French Academic who kept chasing me up a palm tree and saying, ‘meet me in the toilet,’ there was no one who looked like they wanted to chat, and the feeling was mutual.

So I patched out and went back to the story.

After re-reading the first chapter of *Moon Prison* for reference, and scribbling out seven different beginnings, I came up with this:

Yellow Alien Blob – Chapter 1

‘Is this the road to the castle?’

‘Who?’

‘This road. Does it go to the castle over there?’

‘Sorry, I only speak Romanian.’

The man with a head the size of a diced peanut sunk deeper into his scarf and hurried off down the other path. The one that, according to the sign nearby, led to Murk.

‘Only speak Romanian my ass,’ I muttered under my visibly icy breath, watching him shrink into the distance.

That was the thirty-seventh person I'd asked and the thirty-seventh time I'd got the Romanian only line in clear English. And now the sun was slinking down beneath that oddly-jagged mountain over there.

Half an hour later, it had slunk completely.

'Gods, it's colder than Pluto...' I mumbled to a nearby tree.

If person number thirty-eight didn't turn up soon, preferably with a flask of hot water, a thicker jacket and a tent with possibly-not-yet-invented thermal tech then I was done for.

Frozen to death due to poor signage.

No, frozen to death due to aloof locals.

No, frozen to death due to the Romanian God of Winter.

No, frozen to-...

An animal buried among the far-away trees howled very much like a wolf, stopping me mid-whinge. Hopefully just a talented squirrel impressionist. Or a Vampire messing around.

The wind increased to eleven and almost chiseled my cheeks off. My jacket performed in an un-jacket-like manner, again. The sign with MURK – 2KM on it attempted to shake itself out of the soil. Yet, the CASTLE – 500M prop that pointed towards a cliff I'd almost slipped off four hours earlier, stood stock still.

I stared at it, willing the stupid wooden liar to fall.

Nope, too sturdy.

'Okay...' I said, pulling the jacket collar tighter around my neck. 'If the only way to the castle is jumping like a superhero over a gaping, thirty metre abyss, then maybe I should just head to Murk. Can't be as bleak as it sounds.'

The wind seemed to agree, adjusting itself to cruise mode and giving me a few seconds of non-biting chill. Not trusting it completely, I kept my jacket in a firm grip and was just about to start off on the road to Murk when I spotted something in the trees.

Not the ones behind me, the more densely-packed ones on the fake path to the castle.

Was that...

No, it couldn't be.

Unless they'd come from the castle...perhaps via some secret path around the cliff?

I cleared my throat, which turned into a series of coughs, and held up a hand. The figure among the branches stayed pitched to their spot for a moment then raised up their own hand.

Not exactly a wave, but a sign of acknowledgment.

Another howl came from the trees behind, closer this time. It dissipated and was quickly replaced by a new one with a slightly lower pitch.

For the first time in my life, I gulped.

No squirrel was that talented. It was wolves, at least two of them. They were circling me. I checked back to see if there were glowing eyes glaring at me from the shadows and there were. Fuck. I was joking. I didn't expect to actually see any. How were they doing that?

Four yellow eyes glared back at me, giving away nothing.

Shoving my hands in my jacket pocket, I frantically felt around for keys that I knew weren't there. I'd left them back at the hostel. Eleven hours ago. What time was it now? Seven?

I switched to my jeans pocket and pulled out my phone.

Seven twenty.

Fuck. Fuck.. What did I care about time? There were wolves waiting to rip my neck open. Think. Think. The phone...could I use it as a weapon? Shine the light in their faces when they got close? Play one of those roaring fire videos and hope it tricks them?

Hang on, wait...the figure. Was it still there? Did it have an axe or machine gun I could borrow?

Spinning round, I caught a glimpse of something insanely yellow in front of me and tripped backwards as my hands went up to cover my eyes.

Giant wolf eyeball, giant wolf eyeball, giant wolf eyeball, giant...

Whacking my head on the only rock in the nearby area was annoying, yet expected such had been my luck that day, and when the giant wolf eyeball turned out to be a vague yellow blob that was starting to slowly absorb my legs, I thought, forget it, just lay back and let it take you. At least you'll die in an interesting way.

Better than being eaten by those two wolves.

I stopped and looked back at what I'd written.

The word choice wasn't bad, and the flow of it didn't seem to be the worst thing in the world yet...overall, as a total construct, it was shit. *Kuso*. No good. I re-read a few more times, glancing to the side to see if Stahl was watching. He wasn't, he was still asleep.

No, it really was shit. A beginning, okay, but where was it going next? The guy gets absorbed by a yellow blob, goes to a Kuiper Belt moon, and then what? And the logic...why was the blob there? How exactly does the absorbing part work? What was a guy who knew almost no science writing a sci-fi novel for?

The whole thing...it didn't make any sense.

Fucking *Moon Prison*...

I scrunched up the paper, tucked it into the seat pocket and closed my eyes. If Stahl ever asked...no, *when* Stahl asked, cos he definitely would...I'd say I tried but couldn't think of anything good.

Not to *Moon Prison* standard anyway.



Walking floating drifting gliding cauterizing minimizing through a forest that looked something like the forest of illusion in old Mario World and alongside me for the ride was the alien from *Alien* and I was talking at it but the alien wouldn't talk back and every time I tried to grab its wrist the alien shrugged me off and said, 'dude, I don't speak Japanese.'

...

I looked around the forest and saw Alec Guinness waving some kind of blue torch screaming, 'where are your fucking papers, spy?' and then a bear hitting metal with a hammer not saying a word and other things related to other things that seemed to be important but it doesn't matter I thought not really cos I was bored of the forest and the dying leaves and the Alec Guinness act so I turned back to the alien to ask about forests on LV-426 but the alien was now ahead of me by a few trees and

...

I walked faster and caught up asked my LV-426 question but the alien ignored me and then the whole thing happened again about seventeen times until finally we came to a beach and the alien got into a kart and disappeared from view and I didn't know

what to do so I just stood there for a while and I wasn't sure how long I stood there
but the sky went dark and then light and then dark a couple of times so it must've
been as long as it took for that to happen and then when it became light again I
looked down the shore and

...

A Japanese girl Asami...no a blonde...Sadie or Julie Christie maybe...no not a girl a
man...Nick Stahl carrying a kart on his back and when he got close I could see that
Stahl was wearing a kimono and had his eyelids pulled out to look Chinese or
Japanese just like Connery in that racist Bond film and I said it out loud and Stahl
said back, 'sure, Mr. Zhivago, just like that Bond film,' and then put the kart down
and told me to get in so he could chase after the alien who, 'doesn't really respect you
as much as he should', and I said, 'yeah, I got that feeling too,' then jumped in the
kart and started driving even though Stahl kept calling him Mr. Zhivago and we went
faster and faster and sand flicked up into my eyes but it didn't matter cos now I was
wearing goggles and Stahl was somehow hovering next to me moving at the exact
same speed yelling over and over that the alien didn't respect me enough.

...

'I know, I know,' came up out my throat and then Stahl vanished and up ahead was a
heart attack-shaped cave dug into the cliff and in that cave was the alien in its own
kart driving in little circles not getting any further out of the cave and I smirked and
drove to the bottom of the cave and stopped my kart and called up to the alien, 'hey
alien, you're stuck in a cave,' and the alien didn't look down or show any sign he'd
heard anything so I was forced to shout it again and again and again until it was dark
and it started to get cold and a voice that seemed to come from the cliff in front of
me said, 'hey doc, why don't you do something with all this?' and I said, 'that's an idea,
but what? It's the nineteenth century, she doesn't love me anymore,' and the voice
replied.

...

'Julie Christie.'

...

I sighed rubbed my eyes and stared at the sand and cried and all the other shit I [Futsu ni] did when I was fucking miserable but it was too obvious too forced like my body and brain were stuck in a parody with Val Kilmer plus dog ugly types from old British sitcoms so I shook my head and stared at the sea in the distance and the sand nearby and the gas plumes and the chessboards and the astronaut helmet and remembered the ice palace and fur hats and Julie's cunt and everything else that went with it and when I looked up at the heart attack-shaped cave the alien was gone and when I looked down at my feet they were gone too and when I looked at other parts of my body they were gone all of it was gone and I realised I wasn't a man anymore I was the essence of something perhaps something miserable and the only thing I could see was the beach and the only thing I could hear was Steve Martin saying in Nietzschean deadpan, 'I could noover fuck a gaarilla.'

+++

I woke up, surrounded by Steve Martins.

In different coloured wigs.

Some of him female.

I blinked.

Nope, not Steve Martins, different.

There were people...the inside of a plane...*Sentient Koala Farm* star Nick Stahl.

In a flash, everything came shooting back.

The plane. My Japanese face. Fresno. Nick Stahl.

I looked at the mini-screen in front of me, switching to the map of the Atlantic and the current position of the plane.

Not bad. The red journey line was creeping up on the East Coast of the US.

Or Canada.

Or perhaps Maine?

I turned to the side and looked at my impossible new pal Nick Stahl. He was reading something, covertly, his elbow propped up awkwardly, blocking my view.

'Back in consciality, dude.'

'Yeah...!' I slurred, rubbing my eyes, 'consci-what?'

'Consciality. Mix of conscious and reality. Though the reality part of it, guess that's up for grabs.'

I sat up and tried to look at what was in his hand. 'Huh?'

'Forget it, Keni.'

'What?'

'Keni Cat.'

I leaned in, ignoring the toddler staring at me from the seat parallel. 'That's about the tenth time you've called me that. Why?'

'Just a nickname, dude.'

'I'm Mark.'

'Uh-huh.'

'Not Keni. Mark.'

'Course you are.'

I asked if he was listening, but there was no response; his eyes were already back on that stupid paper.

Peeking past his elbow, I managed to catch some of the text. What...no way, it couldn't be. It was the thing I'd written, the amateur shit about the yellow blob. How the hell did he find that?

'This is it, huh?' He was looking at me now. 'This is what you wrote?'

'The yellow blob thing?'

He flipped the paper over, held up the title that took up half the page, that I'd done in bubble font.

'Yeah, kind of. I mean, I didn't finish it, I stopped after the first part...the first section. It's not...'

'Why'd you stop?'

'...finished or anything. That's why it was scrunched up in the seat pocket. It wasn't really working. The flow wasn't right, it was-...there were too many plot holes. I think.'

The paper got folded, dropped on my lap.

'Plane's gonna be grounding soon,' he said, watching me shove the yellow blob shit back in the seat pocket. 'You should keep that, dude.'

'Keep it?'

Stahl reached over and pulled the paper back out, placing it carefully in my hand and closing it into a fist.

'But it's shit.'

'Obviously. Total shit. But it's also a step.'

'Err...is it?'

'Not a huge one, but defo a step.'

'Don't know. I'll probably just leave it in the seat pocket here. Let the cleaners deal with it.'

'No way, can't treat it like that. Gotta keep the thing, remember it. Channel its little heart.'

'But you just said it was shit.'

'Doesn't matter.'

'And you're right, it is shit.'

'No, it's a step, dude, and steps are important. Especially in your case.'

'Wah, I don't-...a step to what?'

He turned sideways and pulled up the arm of the chair. Then drew in close to my ear. 'Still got a little time before the plane drops, so...okay, dude, gonna try and sketch things out a little for you. But no cut-ins. Serious. That gets really fucking annoying.'

I nodded, unsure. Sketch out what?

'Right. Basics first. What do I know about you? You're a writer. What do I know about me? I'm an actor. A good one. One of the best. What do I know about

anyone else? Irrelevant. Though, to be blunt, I do know a lot. A hell of a lot, actually. More than your little monkey brain could comprehend. Serious. I'm talking about C beam shit, comrade. Up there, out in the void, all that beyond the Oort Cloud type of-...'

For a brief moment, maybe half a second, there materialised a purple glint in his eye, but then he blinked and everything was dull white again.

'Nah, I can't. That side of things...can't do it. Cannot be done, Enzo. Not just cos it's beyond you, all of you, but...basically...cos it is beyond you. Literally.'

I stared past him, at the toddler, drool sliding out the side of his open mouth.

'Dude, don't pout. That's not an insult, it's fact. Just means there's a level I'm at, and there's a level you're at, and they're nowhere near each other. Which in monkey brain shorthand means, I know some things you can't even begin to comprehend on any scale. Okay, caveat, maybe you could if I showed you, the surface of it, laid it out in simple colours and simple shapes on a little kiddie playmat, but I don't have the time or energy or patience for any of that. And dude...honestly...you seem like an okay guy, but I don't even know if you're worth all this yet. Ja, harsh, but it's the truth, comrade. These things I know...serious...you just can't even begin to comprehend the most trivial of-...'

He broke off and looked around the plane, stretching out his right arm into the aisle, twisting the wrist erratically.

'Are you okay?'

'Don't interrupt, I'm not done yet.'

'Sorry.'

'Okay, power point. Fine. I'll feed you a few crumbs, the most basic of basic stuff, see how it goes.'

He pulled himself up in his seat and pointed quite openly at the toddler, his parents, the row behind, most of the passengers beyond that. Some of them looked over, most stared at their screens.

'See these people sitting around us now; that guy, his mistress, the flight attendant over there. Of course, she's grinning, serving the coffee and tea and stuff, but what she's really thinking is, yeah, one more hour then I'm gonna get off this shitty plane, get to the hotel, ditch Gary, lock the door, run a bath and watch *Masque of the Red Death*, no disturbances, no sloppy dick rubbing against my thigh.'

He stared at the flight attendant for almost a full minute then lowered his arm and came back to me.

'Jesus, can't even tell you that, can I? That fucking face. Just completely fucking beyond you.'

He looked up at the overhead lockers and said the same thing again, even louder.

'Nick, are you-...'

'Seriously fucking exhausting, dude. This whole revelation thing...the mental energy it takes to tell you people things. Just the numbers of it, the sheer gap between me and you, the universal library of shit in my head, all the empty space in yours. The constant fucking coaching of my own thoughts. Looking around for eavesdroppers, CIA, survivalists, evangelicals. Being panoramic 24/7. It's just fucking draining. You know what I mean?'

My expression was probably not that different from the toddler's, minus the drool.

'Don't have a clue, do you?'

'Not really, no. Sorry.'

He stared at me then the Duty Free catalogue on the back of his seat, and smiled.

'Dude, what am I even saying? Sounds loopy, right? Nah, forget it, just...wipe off, forget all of it. Or most of it. Okay, forget it from the point I said...what was it? The point I said about the-...where I said I knew a lot. Forget that part, don't think about it. I was playing out a script. Yeah, go back to earlier, the part where I said I know you're a writer. Ja, from there.'

'Okay...'

'See, that part is true, undoubtable, I know you're a writer. Ja, don't ask me how I know, I just do. And that thing you just scribbled, the thing about the yellow blob, that was shit, obviously, but, on the flip side, you could see it was shit, which means, and this is my point...it means you have the filter set up already. And that filter is the thing that's gonna make you great. Or good...great might be stretching it a bit...you lot aren't really capable of that level, you're ants, how could you be? But decent, good...that's okay. You can be a good writer, comrade, at some point. That much I'm sure about.'

He stopped and looked at me, leaving some space.

Kuso, I had to say something.

Humility?

I coughed, clearly fraudulent. 'This still sounds a little weird. I mean, I want to believe you, it's a good thing to hear but...the thing you told me not to ask, that's kinda what I want to know.'

'What...how do I know you're a writer?'

'Yeah, that.'

He played with the arm rest, putting it down, pulling it back up. 'One day.'

'You mean one day you'll tell me?'

'Maybe. But the point I was trying to get across was...that blob thing you wrote, that's your foundation stone. Is it shit? Yes, but it's the base that you're gotta build from. And what comes after the base? The next stone, dude. Ja, the next stone, that's kinda obvious, but that is objectively what comes next, and then the third stone and the fourth and the fifth and on and on until you can look at your work in totality and you know. Know that you're at the peak. And that peak, dude, when you get there...you won't be the only one there, of course, there are about a thousand other ants out there at your level, but that's okay cos you're there, too, right? Better to be on the peak with others than in the shit with masses of...with other non-writers. Way better.'

The tannoy came on and the pilot told us the weather was a step up from the dystopian grey of Liverpool and that we would be starting the descent into Philadelphia soon.

'So, there's the pep talk, comrade. Remember it, or forget it, whatever.'

I put my seatbelt on, he twirled his in air circles.

'Nick, can I ask one thing?'

'Sure, dude. Hit me.'

'Is there a time scale for when I'll become...what you said, a writer?'

'Time scale? Sure. Two years. Maybe one, depending what happens in the next few weeks.'

'What do you mean?'

'The girl, comrade. You're gonna look for her, right?'

'You mean Sadia?'

He stopped spinning his seatbelt and tilted his head in a pretty obvious *come on* affectation.

'Don't know. Haven't had a message from her in a while.'

'Ha, I don't think that part's gonna be a problem.'

'Which part?'

His head went back against the seat and he closed his eyes. If there was a response, I'd clearly missed it.

The flight attendant came past to check we were strapped in, and somehow didn't notice that Nick's seatbelt was hanging over the armrest.

She smiled and moved on. Probably thinking of the hotel room and *Masque of The Red Death*. I sat back, looked at the Duty Free catalogue. Briefly thought about patching in for a final bit of beach VR. Vetoed it. Thought of *Dream Fucker* and *Lunar Crone*. Nuked both, let out an abrupt laugh. Remembered I just asked *which part* and Nick still hadn't answered. Turned and asked him again. 'Which part won't be a problem?'

Then the plane started to slope downwards.

I waited for Nick to come back online and answer my question, but he stayed exactly where he was. Didn't move an inch, not even to squirm around for a better position.

After a few minutes he made a noise, something like an animal, a jackal maybe. Some of the other passengers heard it and looked over at us.

'Nick, you're...'

He cut me off with another noise, this one more like a bird. I stared at the seat pocket, aware that everyone in the cabin was staring at us. Luckily, the toddler started mimicking the animal sounds, which took a bit of the weight off.

Not that Nick Stahl gave a shit.

Was he that confident that no one remembered his films?

Evidently not.

A few more surprisingly accurate jackal noises, a little bit of shaking...and then his eyes opened again.

'Why the fuck is everyone looking at me?' he asked, staring at the mini-screen on the back of the seat.

'I don't know, you...kinda zoned out there.'

'What?'

'You were making cat noises, like a jackal or something.'

'Fucking ant-scape.'

He mumbled something about taking off the top of the plane and watching them all smash down onto the fucking ground and their insides squish open.

The passengers turned away, going back to their screens and phones and flight attendant sex fantasies.

'Are you alright?' I asked.

He continued staring straight ahead, the mini-screen on the back of the seat blank.

'There's no point going, comrade. She's not there.'

'What?'

He turned sideways again, facing me.

'I said, quite clearly, there's no point going, comrade. She is not there.'

'Sadia?'

His eyes, in the flash of one single blink, turned purple.

'She is not there, Keni. Not fucking there.'

'Nick, your eyes...'

Then another blink and they were normal again. Clear azure blue.

'What?'

I slouched back into my seat, half-checking for another, an empty one nearby, but everything was taken. And Nick Stahl was still glaring at the side of my face.

'Nothing,' I muttered, taking my story back out of the seat pocket, folding out the title page, pretending to read through. 'Tiredness, probably.'

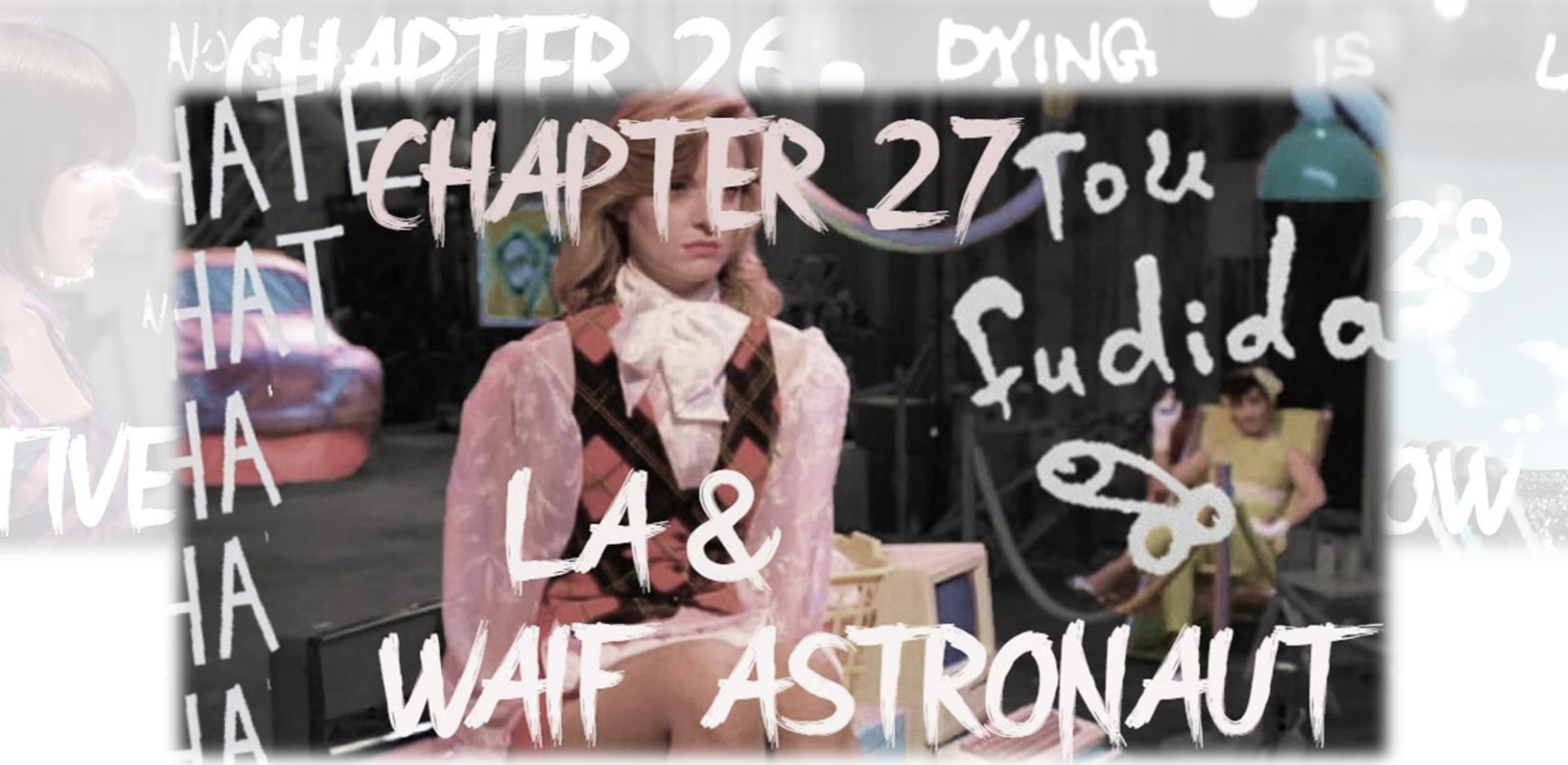
'Ant exhaustion.'

'Be better when we've landed.'

'... ..'

'Sorry?'

He stared a second longer then faced forward, taking out the Duty Free catalogue. 'Okay. Let's see what cheap shit they're flogging this year.'



The plane landed, or grounded as Nick called it, and we disembarked.

For god knows what reason, one passenger couldn't let go of the shitty airline VR server and had to be dragged out of his seat by two of the bulkier flight attendants, yelling *beach tunnel, beach tunnel* as he went.

Despite the oddness of it all, the strop was mildly entertaining, for everyone except the filmn star.

He was too busy licking his left hand.

No idea why.

+++

We walked along the flat escalator tracks, onto the MAV train and under the tarmac to the main terminal. Stahl didn't say anything the entire way.

Reaching the mouth of the immigration line, he pulled out a card with his number and address and told me to give him a call soon as I figured out he was right about the girl.

'But...'

'You can keep *Moon Prison* too, my treat.'

'Keep it?'

'Mata ne.'

Holding up a solitary arm, he walked off to the left, joining the queue for American citizens. I pulled up next to the nearest form rack and watched. It took about two minutes before he looked at his ticket, mouthed something into the neck of the man in front of him, maybe a curse, then sauntered back over.

'Don't say a fucking word,' he barked, pupils flashing purple.

We carried on past the immigration line, along another escalator track and over to the gate where our connecting flight to LAX was waiting for us.

To avoid laughing, I pretended to read the back of *Moon Prison*.

It mostly worked.

Until I saw the *Beyond The Rabbit Hole* comparison.

'Equals Tsukubashi's work then surpasses it...' I muttered, reading out the quote and adding an even lower, 'says a fucking clown,' at the end.

'Read. Study. Emulate,' said Nick, tapping the back cover.

'Yeah.'

+++

On the second plane, the first couple of hours were pretty much the same as the previous flight [minus the writing].

Stahl fell asleep quickly, with his head back against the seat cushion, abnormally straight, while I sat there and re-read my yellow alien blob mess, thinking about the time scale he'd mentioned. Two years? Maybe a year? I was only twenty-two. Would I really go so far so quickly?

I read my story for a seventh time.

Not based on this shit.

+++

The second half of the flight was marginally better.

Stahl found some playing cards in the seat pocket and roped in the guy subsumed by an Everton Jacket next to us to play blackjack, or twenty-one as I knew it.

Surprisingly, for the guy who'd set up the game, Nick Stahl was an awful card player.

The first hour, he lost almost every hand.

Then he suggested we start playing for money.

I said, 'sure, why not?' but the other guy backed out, saying that was a shark's line.

'Dude, you go to the cinema much? You ever seen *Terminator?* *Dead Bitch On Pluto?* That was me. Nick Stahl.'

'Those are old filmns.'

'What, they don't exist now? I don't still get residuals every month?'

'Not what I said, mate.'

'I'm fucking loaded, comrade.'

'Movie stars can still be sharks,' the man said, sucking in his Everton jacket and folding arms over it.

'Ha, grey wheels of a reeling machine. Serious, us movie stars can barely count out a full suit, let alone scam shit. Ask anyone, dude. It's almost legendary how bad we are.' He started shuffling the cards. 'That's why we play so much. Losses don't mean anything to us. Money comes in, sails out, comes in, sails out, comes in...on infinite fucking loop.'

The man buckled and said he'd play one hand to see what was what.

Stahl said, 'fine, one hand, Cautious Joe.'

We played, I won.

The man stayed in for ten more hands. Stahl won almost all of them.

'Knew you were a shark.'

'So why did you play?'

'Fucking obvious,' the man mumbled and tried to turn away.

'No. If you knew I was a shark, why did you play?'

'I'm asleep, movie stir. Good night.'

The man put the hood of his footy jacket up and closed his eyes.

'Just me and you then,' I said, already shuffling the cards.

Stahl didn't hear it. He was too busy reaching over and placing his fingertips on the man's throat.

A dazed *what* was all I could get out.

The man's eyes popped back open as Stahl tightened his grip, asking in a brusque whisper, 'why did you play, why did you play?' Then leaned his elbow in when there was no response. Lifted his body into a semi-standing position and pushed. Licked the back of his own hand.

As most people would in the same situation, the man wriggled, gasped for breath, made desperate whistling sounds in lieu of speech, yet, for some bizarre reason, declined to raise his hands in self-defence.

Was this real?

A coordinated prank?

I looked around for help, but the other passengers were either watching screens or patched in to the shitty VR. No one seemed to be interested in the live strangulation taking place in plain sight, not even the flight attendants.

Turning back to the lunacy, I graveled-up my voice as far as I could without morphing into Tom Waits and told Stahl to stop.

No reaction.

I tried again, rougher, louder, but still the choking continued. What was I supposed to do here? It was insane, a faded movie star, killing a random guy in an Everton jacket, while everyone just sat back and did nothing. It didn't make sense...he couldn't just-...

'Nick, stop...you're killing him.'

I put a hand on his shoulder, but he shrugged it off like it was a mosquito selling blood insurance.

'Serious...'

No response.

Fuck, it couldn't wait much longer, the guy was on the brink. Movie star or not, you couldn't just end people because they pissed you off at cards. And cards that you had won at, too.

I took a breath and planted both hands on Stahl's shoulders, using around 98% of my strength to pull him off the guy's neck.

It worked, kind of. Stahl shifted back a little then spun right round to strangle a new victim. I raised an arm, vaguely to defend myself, but there was no need as his hands had dropped and he was smiling like a preacher in a mega-church.

'What the-...'

He picked up the cards and started shuffling, humming a melody to himself.

I checked on the man he'd half-choked to death and saw he was fast asleep, chest moving up and down, no marks on his neck.

'Looks like it's just you and me, dude,' Stahl said between hums, dealing out the next hand.

+++

At LAX, we ran through the same procedure as before.

In the immigration line, Stahl pulled out his card and told me the same things, but this time added, 'dude, I get why you want to try.'

'Great. Thanks.'

'She is a very young, relatively pretty girl.'

'Err...yeah.'

'But don't let it distract from *Moon Prison*. Or the yellow blob thing. That's where the future lies.'

He patted me on the shoulder then walked off into the line for American citizens. I waited until he was through then walked farther along, latching onto the end of the other, longer queue, the one with the FOREIGN ALIENS sign hanging above.

+++

In the Arrivals Hall, there were lots of desks with leaflets for San Diego and LA and San Francisco, but none for Fresno.

I went to the information lady and asked her how to get there.

'No buses to Fresno today.'

'Okay. Tomorrow?'

'No, no buses. Go to the bus station, ask them.'

'LA bus station?'

She looked at me like I was simple.

'Okay. Do you know how to-...'

'Shuttle bus outside, turn left, right, left again then go straight.'

'And that'll take me to-...'

'Downtown. Hollywood. Venice Beach. Wherever you wanna go.'

I opened my mouth to say more, but a Spanish guy came from the side and asked her where the station VR servers were.

I left him to it and wandered off to find the shuttle bus.

In my head, I contrived the loosest of plans: find hostel, get bus info, go to Fresno. Then added on *Locate Sadia*. And a detailed sex fantasy in a diner. Followed by a *who the fuck are you* scene outside a front door, with a topless Andi Chopra lurking in the background. Then air on Pluto. Martokras astride human corpses with giant

spoons. Tsukubashi colouring in a messy-looking spiral that he insisted was a wormhole.

Kuso...blank. Go blank. Deflate for a bit. Jesus.

Heading outside, I saw two women smoking by wheeled luggage, talking very fast, very confidently, about the state of the music scene in LA.

They looked young, twenty, maybe twenty one.

Around Sadia's age.

I hovered in their general orbit for a few minutes, wondering if they were singers or in a band I might've heard of. Almost on cue, they changed subject to the movie industry.

Woman 1: 'Like, I probably shouldn't tell you this, but the thing he's writing it's really out there, really satirical...'

Woman 2: 'Satire...cool...like *Catdog* and *Microwaves Go To Hell*...'

Woman 1: 'Yeah, right, *Catdog*...and, like, I don't know if this premise has been done before, it's like, all these primary school kids being stalked and killed one at a time by this schizo Argentinian robot and...'

Woman 2: 'Okay, kinda weird, but cool...'

Woman 1: '...he said it's not really satire, it's more political, like, there's a political layer or something underneath, but that's kinda irrelevant cos the core story's so fucking funny. Like, seriously, little kids getting slaughtered, who's done that before? And the best part is, it's set in Brazil, where he's from...and he's grafting a pretty big part into it just for me...yeah, I know, pretty cool...like, I could be hitting Brazilian movie land or something, y'know...finally getting out of this lake of shit swamp sludge...sooooo fucking about time.'

Fuck, they talked fast...was Sadia like this too?

In my head, I made corrections: find hostel, get bus info...go to Fresno the day after tomorrow.

+++

The hostel I ended up at was on Hollywood Boulevard.

The rough side, by the looks of it.

Poor fuckers in messiah robes and disheveled tents and actual shopping trolleys with shit piled up inside and hordes of tourists lost in the adventurist shlock on the opposite sidewalk putting absolutely no pieces of the puzzle together or even realizing the puzzle existed cos they had theirs, they were okay and all those tents were probably full of junkies anyway, can't help someone who won't help themselves, hand up not hand out etc. etc.

How I got there was completely accidental, too.

Some random English girl on the shuttle bus told me she was staying there and maybe they'd have other rooms still free, for drop-ins. By a stroke of luck, or other guests catching a glimpse of the homeless encampment outside, they did. Of course, I didn't get the same room as the girl on the bus, I'm never that lucky, but I did see her later in the common room, wearing a skin-tight *Waif Astronaut* t-shirt, and, taking the seat opposite, I let her know that I was planning to go to Fresno the day after next.

'Cool,' she said back, scooping up foam from the side of her coffee cup. 'Where's that?'

'Not sure, actually. Somewhere near LA.'

'Like a day trip or something?'

'Probably longer.' I paused, looking at the girl's face with a spoon stuck in the mouth and realising she was quite pretty. 'I'm gonna see my cousin.'

'Cool.'

'You staying here long?'

'This hostel?'

I nodded.

'Actually, I'm here for like one night then I'm moving to this resort place...it's in Compton, I think.'

'Compton. Wait, isn't that Ice Cube?'

'Huh?'

'Ice Cube, the old rapper guy. *NWA. Ghosts of Mars. Thin Buddha*. Didn't he come from Compton?'

'Err, maybe, I guess.' She dipped the spoon back in her cup, this time bringing up pure coffee and sipping it like soup. 'It's a pretty cool hostel anyway. There's a pool and a barr and palm trees planted in, stuff like that.'

'But...isn't it a gang area?'

'Nah, no way. Like, crime gangs?'

'Maybe not, don't know. It's mostly filmns I've seen...and it might've been the other one anyway...Inglewood.'

Her hand flicked non-existent crumbs off the Waif text on her t-shirt, which also happened to be her left tit. 'But...like it doesn't make sense, right? If it's got all these gangs and stuff, why is there, like, a resort hostel there too?'

'Good point.'

'Nah, there's no gangs. They would've told me.'

'Right.'

She looked at the *Pluto 2280* poster on the wall, confused, then back at me, her hand moving up to the collar and pulling it down a bit.

Kuso, she was pretty.

Colombian / Middle Eastern mix maybe, with a slight Essex accent.

And right in front of me, alive, breathing, real face, real body.

Doing hand movements near her tits.

'You're British-Chinese, right?' she asked, sipping coffee.

'Just British.' I coughed, almost forgetting the face. 'Some Japanese ancestry.'

'Cool, cool. I like Asian guys.'

‘Really? Then yes, I’m completely Japanese.’

She laughed, not a huge one, but enough. And her hand had started creeping along the table, two thirds of the way to my forearm.

‘Maybe I’ll see you around later.’

‘You’re going?’

‘Or tomorrow morning maybe. Yeah, gonna see some friends, probably get back late. But tomorrow for sure. Breakfast time.’

‘I’ll be here.’

She got up and took her coffee cup to the sink, then left it there.

‘I’m Syria,’ she said, walking back past the table.

‘Like the country?’

‘I’ll pretend you didn’t say that.’

‘Yeah, sorry. Probably not the first time you’ve heard it. I’m Mark, by the way. Not a very Japanese...’

The rest died out, dried up, self-sublimated.

Obviously didn’t matter who I was, the real face, real body Syria had already gone, without a look back either.

Fuck, she really was pretty though.

And at least fifty per cent interested.

Sadia who?

+++

That night on my bunk, with two Dortmund fans and a Chinese girl comatose in the other beds, I made a tentative plan to go into Syria’s room and slip naked under her duvet.

Problem: I didn’t know which room she was in.

And I had no way to find out as I hadn’t seen her since the common area earlier.

Solution: go into each room, do a quick scan, then say sorry, wrong door.
When I get to Syria, say, 'hi, been looking for you everywhere, mind if I slip in there too?'

My gut told me she wouldn't mind.

Asians were cool.

My face was Asian.

I stared up at the holographic Neptune orbiting the main bulb, going through seventeen different interpretations of her t-shirt message earlier.

No, she probably would mind.

I was a complete stranger.

She was just being amiable.

Fucking in a dorm?

Alteration: check out of this place and go to the Compton hostel tomorrow.
Find her there. Grow on her slowly, like bacteria. The good kind.

What about Sadia?

Fuck, my beautiful Sadia. Well, she'd still be there. And the truth was...I wasn't ready for her yet. Even talking to Syria, I'd been slow, lethargic...

Needed to practise a little first.

Elevate my level.

+++

That night I dreamt I was Hamlet.

No-one had been murdered...things were generally okay in Denmark...but Polonius was nagging me to go to Fresno.

No.

Yes.

No.

Yes.

It's a no, Polonius.

Go.

I can't.

Go.

Not yet.

Go.

Tomorrow.

Now.

I'm not ready.

Don't care. Go.

No.

Go and kiss her.

No.

Marry her.

Leave me alone, Polonius.

Marry her now.

No.

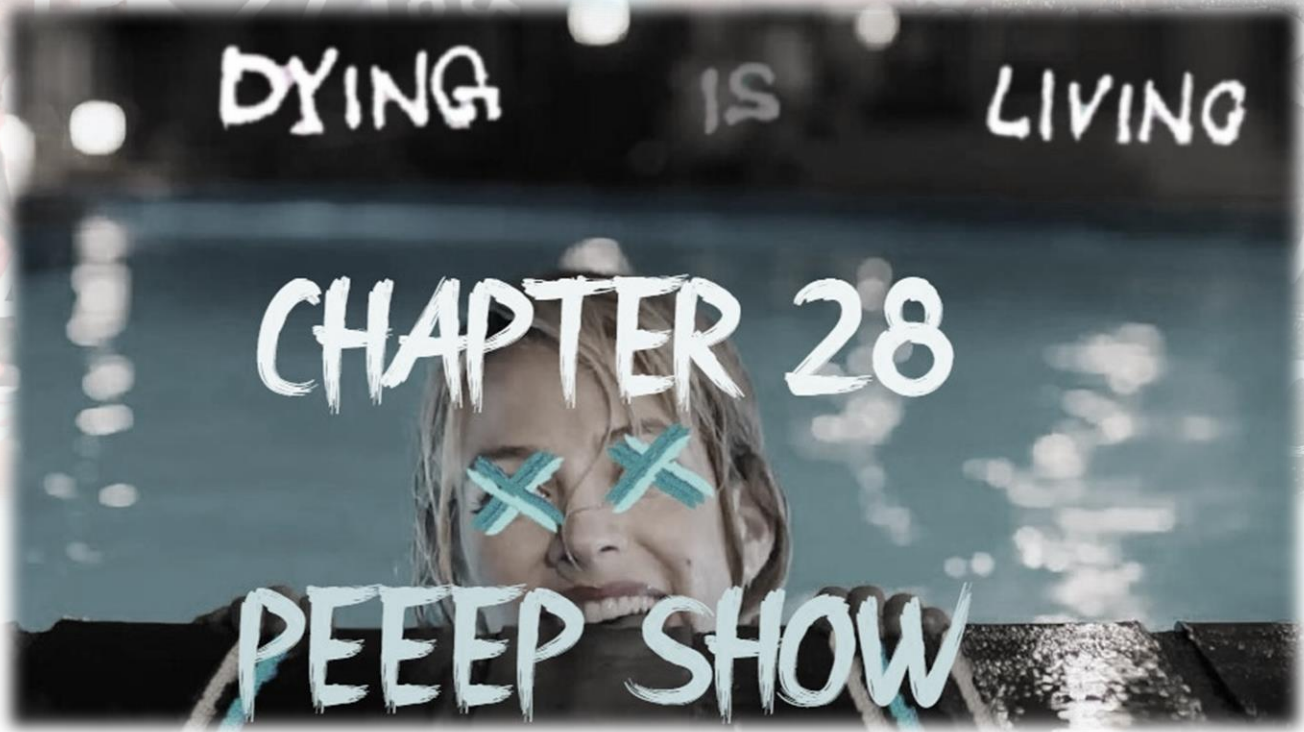
Do it.

No.

Do it, do it, do it.

Fuck off, old man.

I woke up sweating, right arm stretched off the bunk, stabbing dream
Polonius in his annoyingly persistent face.



The hostel in Compton was so strange I honestly thought it couldn't be real.

Spanish Colonial/brutalist design.

Reception desk flanked by *Elsinore* banner.

Dorm room signs with different *Hamlet* character names, several vowels eroded.

Blanched palm trees, cracked fairy lights.

Kenneth Branagh standing by the pool holding a polystyrene sword, saying over and over, 'kin, kind, kin, kind...a little more than clever, but less than Kevin Kline.'

No, not really Branagh, just a guy who looked like him...or looked like Branagh's version of Hamlet. Maybe an out of work actor practising for a local production. Or a nut wandered in from the street outside.

Whoever it was, I blanked him and headed to my room.

Tutted at the *Ophelia* pic & sign.

Said a relieved *ku-so* when I beeped open the door and saw it was empty.

Found my bunk, clambered up the splintered ladder, lay down and stretched my legs out past the footboard.

Plan?

Quick nap then head to the common room, wait for Syria and her airtight, *WAIF ASTRONAUT* t-shirt to show up.

Feign surprise when I see her? Or go full honesty and thank her for the hostel recommendation?

Hard yawn, followed by another.

Ah, decide when you see her, I told myself, eyes closing.

+++

When I opened them again, the room was filtered with a citrine dust strip of LA sunlight and there were voices below. I rotated and instantly felt cold. It was Syria, right there, along with two guys who looked like surfers.

Somehow, they didn't seem to notice me at all.

Maybe they'd forgotten something and were just coming back in quickly to get it?

I waited out thirty seconds, a minute.

Nope.

They were sitting on the bed, talking about sex, one of the guys with his paws all over Syria's tits, the other pulling off his pants.

This was not transitory.

I kept one eye open, scared they'd see me if I opened both.

They probably wouldn't...Syria was too busy taking her knickers off now, and the two surfers were rubbing something on their cocks...some kind of cream.

Jesus...

Here? In the middle of the day?

I shifted my legs a little, trying to move further back onto the bed so they wouldn't look up and see me watching them.

Was this really happening?

Maybe I'd patched into one of those parallel hostel VR things, where guests could play with replicas of other guests without the awkwardness of actually communicating with them?

I blinked, gently slapping my face.

They were still there, all of them kneeling on the bed, touching each other.

But...

This was bizarre. Their faces were at a pretty high level. Why didn't they notice me?

No answer given.

The scene played on.

And on.

I'd never seen this kind of stuff done live before. Syria on her back, taking one guy in her mouth, while the other alternated between a few strokes in her pussy and then a few rougher ones in her ass.

It wasn't flawless like porn.

Quite a few times, she lost her grip on the guy's dick and had to grab it again.

Then the other guy stopped suddenly and said, 'it's okay, I didn't cum.'

He did a couple more thrusts to prove it and then stopped again.

'Fuck, I came.'

Syria stopped sucking and called him a motherfucker.

'Lost focus,' he said, tone marked by genuine disappointment.

'Fucking simp.'

'Couldn't stop it...'

She leaned forward and punched him in the thigh.

The fun was clearly over.

I tried to pull the duvet over my head, realising they were less distracted now, but it wasn't enough.

'Hey, there's someone up there...'

'What?'

'On the bunk...some perv watching.'

I pushed the duvet back down and tried to act like I'd just woken up.

'Huh...'

Syria was frozen, naked on the edge of the bed, legs still spread in a rough diamond shape, staring up at me.

'Hey,' I said, faux-yawning, stretching out my arms. 'What time is it?'

'The fuck?' she said, accent going full Essex.

Both guys shuffled their pants back on, looked at each other then back at me. Said the same thing she had then told me to get the fuck down or else.

'Down where?'

'Get the fuck down here, perv.'

I hadn't realized by looking at them, but they were English too.

'Look, I've just woken up. You do whatever you're doing...it's fine. I don't care.'

'Down, perv.'

'Err...no.'

'Fucking coward...get down here or we're coming up and dragging you.'

Syria put some of her clothes back on and walked out of the room saying we were all perverts. The two guys didn't seem that bothered; they were too busy banging hands on their own bunk ladder.

'Get down.'

'Get the fuck down, perv.'

'Fucking coward.'

'Fucking incel cunt.'

I didn't know why, but something in my brain clicked and the two guys morphed into two Japanese kids in a playground. For some reason, I really wanted to beat the shit out of them. And what's more, I genuinely believed I could.

Throwing the duvet cover completely off, I shifted over to the edge of the bed, my legs hanging over the side.

The two faux-surfers put their shorts and t-shirts on, still talking shit.

'Come on then.'

'Get the fuck down.'

'Let's do this, Ronny.'

'Gonna fuck you up, perv.'

'Okay then,' I said, jumping down from the bunk.

My odds weren't that bad. Obviously there were two of them, but they weren't well-built. And they weren't tough. I didn't know why I knew that, but I was sure of it.

I moved forward, wordless.

'What the...'

'Not yet, mate...what you doing?'

'Smack him, Ronny.'

'Back up, perv...I'm not fucking around here.'

Both of them retreated towards the door while continuing with the threats.

One of them [Ronny] didn't go quite as far as the other and that pretty much sealed his fate. I paused, faking doubt, then took a sudden step forward and aimed my fist about two inches behind his head.

It seemed to work.

More than worked...my knuckles hit him so hard it nearly snapped his neck off.

At least I thought it might've been that hard.

Either way, he was on the floor. Actually, his head was on the concrete outside as the girl had left the door open.

The other guy, his mate, said, 'Jesus fucking Jesus,' then turned and ran.

I hovered over Ronny and thought about bending down and smacking him again. But I wasn't sure if I could get any power on the punch that way.

'Mate...wait...' Ronny said, holding his nose.

'What's up, *kasu*?'

'No, it's-...wait, don't...don't hit.'

Ronny got up and tried to grab the door frame, but missed and fell full spread onto the patio outside. I waited for him to get up and try again. He did. This time he managed to grab the trunk of a pale-looking palm tree and stumble away.

I waited a few minutes then followed his trail out into the sunshine.

Syria was in the pool, treading water.

'Nice hostel,' I said, walking up to the edge, scraping the end of my toes against what I presumed was an old blood stain.

'What did you do?'

'Punched him.'

'Oh.'

'He called me an incel cunt.'

'Did he punch you first?'

'Huh? Why would I let him do that?'

'Good point.'

I looked at her body under the surface and realised her hand was down there too. She was cleaning herself in the pool?

'Were you really watching us...in there?'

'Bits of it.'

'You were at the other hostel. I remember, you said the thing about Ice Cube.'

I nodded, leaving the dry blood stain and walking a little further along the edge of the pool, where there were cracks and minor graffiti scrawls. *We jizzed in the pool, no more war, sleep, work obey* etc.

'You must think I'm a slut,' Syria said, bringing her hands back up, pushing her wet slab of hair to the side.

'Not really.'

'I'm not.'

'Great.'

'I just like sex.'

'That's normal.'

'Not to addiction levels though.'

'Okay.'

'You really hit him?'

I looked at my hand and nodded. It seemed strange that I'd done that now. I'd never hit anyone before. Never. Not unless you counted that guy in the club, the one who wanted to drive me to the airport. But that was self-defence, and I only hit the side of his head anyway. *Kuso*, I was a pacifist, not a brawler.

'He was bleeding,' she added, swimming right up to the edge, putting one hand over the *jizzed* part of the graffiti.

'I guess.'

'No, I saw him. He was really bleeding. Quite bad. Not that I condone violence, but...it's pretty hot when guys fight.'

'Is it?'

'Especially Asian guys.'

'Right.'

'You must've hit him pretty hard to make him bleed.'

'Yeah, pretty hard.'

She dropped the graffiti hand under the water and slowly peeled up her t-shirt, revealing her right breast.

'You wanna go back to the room?'

I looked down on her. She really was pretty, prettier than Sadia perhaps...but she was also a sociopath. And a sex-nut. And English.

'Nah, I'm good.'

'In the pool?'

'I have a girlfriend.'

'Ah, a loyal soldier.' She pushed her t-shirt back down and swam backwards to the middle of the pool, eyes fixed on me. 'Bet she can't do what I can do.'

'Probably not.'

'Might see you tonight then...back on the bunks.'

I stared at her legs kicking under the water and followed her last line to its inevitable endpoint. Same room. Lights out. Syria slipping under my duvet. Getting her hands on me. Getting my hands on her. The guy I hit, Ronny, coming back with a knife or a shotgun. Or a measuring tape. Watching to see what shape I was, how long I could last.

Not a good scene.

Any of it.

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Luckily the hostel had more than one free room that day. I moved my stuff in to *Rosencrantz* and waited to see if the guy, Ronny, would call the police and press charges.

After two hours of hovering near the window, tracing chipped paint on the pane, I concluded that he hadn't.

Maybe he realised he'd been a twat.

Or maybe he was embarrassed.

I sat down on the new bunk and tried to read more of *Moon Prison*, but my mind kept going back to Syria in the pool, and then Sadia next to a giant typewriter.

Pretty soon the scenarios changed, and Syria and Sadia were duelling each other. On the surface of Pluto. Watched by a covert group of Martokras.

The first time, Syria won.

Every other time, I made sure Sadia did.

+++

After letting the Sadia avatar stab Syria in the *Waif Astronaut* t-shirt a few hundred times, I added myself to the scene. At first I was watching from the stands like a Roman senator, but it seemed too one-sided, so I moved myself into the victim role.

Stood statue still as Sadia slashed at my neck.

Took off my hoodie and put on a t-shirt that said *KILL BABY KILL*.

Died fifty, sixty times...painless...last words always cut off...right before the part where I said *sorry*.

+++

Growing tired of all the gore and Romanic imagery, I rolled off the bunk and ambled to the computerrrs in reception.

Twenty dollars for thirty minutes.

Five dollars to print one page.

Jesus.

Paying for an hour [with an audible grumble], I slouched down in front of the screen and perused their VR selection. It was a brief perusal. Seven titles, five of them ancient, one of them notoriously pro-adventurist, and the last one *Harem Survival 3*.

It'd been a while since I'd had a simulated wank, and the staff guy was rooted to his phone, completely oblivious, so I patched in and headed straight for the private onsen zone. There were sounds of other players virtually fucking or getting fucked behind wooden door panels, and those sounds continued as I entered a free onsen room, threw off my yukata and jumped on the whore simulacrum relaxing in the water.

As with every other open-to-the-public VR sex experience, there was no physical consequence in the real world, though I imagined that my facial expression was probably more crazed than usual. Head between the girl's thighs. Her mouth on me. Both of us splashed with spring water as I drilled her from behind.

Completely unreal...yet not.

After we were done, I attempted two minutes of plot, listening to the girl complain about the new rules implemented by the harem director, but her nipples were bobbing on the surface as she talked and her face started to look like Syria's and...

When we'd finished for the second time, I said I had to go invade Mongolia and patched out.

The screen stared back at me, asking if I wanted to re-enter the game.

Not in my current state, I thought, remembering Syria on the bunk with the two guys and quickly setting fire to the whole charade.

Sadia...sweet, talented Sadia...she was the real one.

This was nothing.

Just a *stored up too long* sex urge.

And now it was done.

Switching off the VR, I loaded up the writing site. Clicked and clicked and clicked until I was reading her stuff again...Sadia's stuff...hoping there'd be some new stories up.

There weren't.

Her last log in date was the same as it was when I'd left Liverpool.

Fuck. *Kuso*. Fucking *kuso*.

Where are you, Sadia?

Did I do something wrong?

I read the last story she'd uploaded, looking for clues, looking for any mention or reference to a Mark character or a guy from England or...even a pervert English rat who tried to get into her knickers...or beyond her knickers.

Anything to show she was still thinking about me:

Salia tapped the animal card sticking out from the top of the broken box, but didn't pull on it. Instead, she drank some of the coffee, went back to her laptop and typed something. On the screen, some pictures of a warehouse came up.

*'TRAGIKAL COLLECTIVE OPEN DAY – A GUIDE TO THE ART
COMPLEX'*

Oh, they're calling it a complex now, she thought, scrolling through the different pictures, each one showing a different artist's studio space and some of their work.

There was one with some kind of wire sculptures.

Pass.

There was another with a huge canvas that said 'Is this Art?' in large black letters.

Super pass.

That's the problem with art, she thought, picturing the smirking face of Adam, laughing a little herself too. People get lazy and turn to Dadaism. They don't know what to say and they don't have much technique, so they do what they're already capable of and claim subversion.

Was that Dadaism? Or the other one...post-modernism? Did that even have a definition?

Brutalism?

She looked around the living room, at the shadowed reflection on the TV, at the Chinese banner on the wall...at the Francis Bacon prints in her room, still rolled up like abandoned hostages in their imitation-wood tubes.

The image was extracted from memory, and unclear, forcing her to rise up and walk down the short corridor to her room. The door was open, which was fine as there was nothing inside to look at, and the bed was still in the same chaotic state she'd left it in that morning.

Apart from that, there wasn't much else to describe. The walls were bare, the wardrobe was a quarter full and the only thing the desk had was the prospectus from her new school that Adam had used as an ashtray.

Purging defiantly the words prison cell from her brain, she sat down on the mattress and looked at the cardboard tubes sticking out on the floor below.

They weren't so bad...

Not if the idea was to stop her doing something.

Cos they were Bacon's ideas, not hers.

She was simply appreciating them.

Reaching down, she picked up one of the tubes and pulled out the print inside. In her heart, she wanted it to be the Electrified Pope, but when she unrolled it and held it out, she saw it was Blood on the Floor.

There was a noise outside, like someone sawing a tree.

It wasn't the first time she'd heard it, and she suspected it wasn't an actual tree sawing, but it was enough to spook her and looking at a Bacon print in a spooked state was not good.

'Later,' she whispered, rolling up the print and pushing it back inside the tube.

I stopped reading.

Who was Adam?

Why was there a Chinese banner on the wall?

Was that her real housse?

Was I Francis Bacon?

It was no good...this kind of writing...it was impossible to trace anything. What I needed was one of her shorter pieces, on paper, in my actual hands. Some small slice of authenticity.

Agreeing with my own plan, I went over to the guy behind the desk and asked if the printer was working.

'Five dollars one page,' he said, staring at his phone. 'No child porn, Nazi shit or snuff.'

'Okay, well...I'll probably be printing a few so-...'

'Over there. Plug the cable in, press print.'

'Cable?'

'Auxiliary. Main auto-co is down.'

'What, permanently?'

'Plug in the cable, press print,' he repeated, adding *fuck you* to his phone screen.

'Okay. Fine. Where is *this* auxiliary cable?'

He played out a few more seconds on whatever game he was failing at, then pointed with a death yawn at the printer near the computerr I'd been using.

'Got it. Thanks. *Kasu*.'

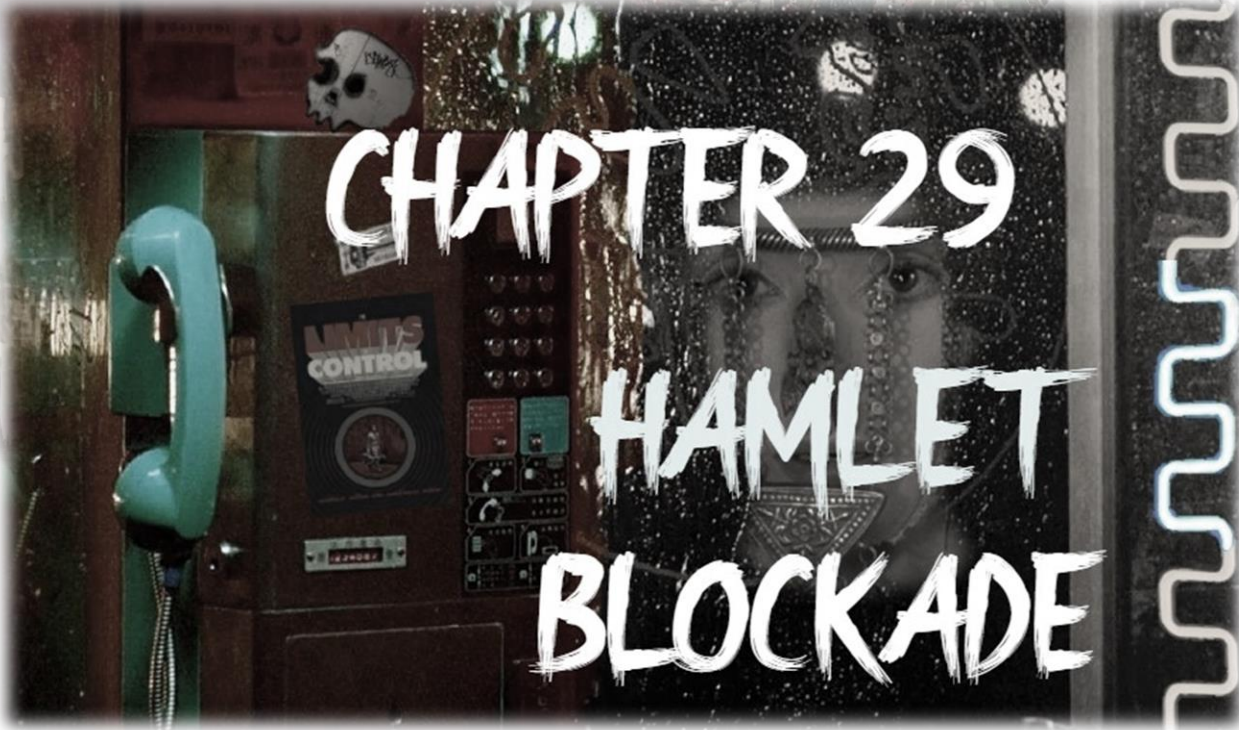
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The next day I checked out of the hostel, determined to stop fucking around in Lunatic Alley and fly direct to my sweet Sadi-phelia in Fresno.

Wasn't easy though.

At the station they explained to me in primary school cadence that all the buses were broken and wouldn't be operational for another two weeks.

'All of them?'

'That's right.'

'What happened?'

'Someone broke in here last night...took all the engine parts out and...yeah, they're all dead till we get those new parts in.'

'And that takes two weeks?'

'Fraid so.'

'Seems like a long time.'

'Well, yes and kinda no. See, the parts aren't all American, some of them are actually Ghanaian...'

'Ghanaian?'

'...Accra-produced. Ghanaian, that's right. Suppose you could try the train station...if you haven't already? They tend to go to Fresno.'

'Great. Thanks.'

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Train station wasn't much better.

Apparently, the only track going to Fresno...stopping in Fresno...was occupied.

'You mean the only train?'

'No, the track itself. There are people on it. Actors.'

'What...why?'

'It's spontaneous theatre. Ever since the economy went bad, these guys have been popping up, doing Shakespeare, Mamet, Soyinka, Cheever, stuff like that. And now it's our turn.'

'That's-...I don't understand. They're performing plays on the track?'

'Yup.'

'The railway track to Fresno?'

'That's right.'

'For how long?'

'Roughly...two weeks, give or take.'

'*Kuso*...'

'If it's any consolation, they're not awful. A friend of mine saw them last night. An Indonesian reinterpretation of *Hamlet* apparently.'

I almost laughed.

'Is there any other way I can get to Fresno?'

'You could drive there.'

'I don't have a license,' I lied. Didn't want to tell them my license had a picture of my old face, not the Japanese one.

'Oh, that's odd. Well, I suppose you could try the bus station.'

'Thanks.'

I turned and got out of there, trying to think what I was gonna do in this bizarro city for another two weeks.

Then I had another thought.

My passport...

If I'm Japanese, and my passport isn't...how the hell did I get here?

Why did no-one stop me?

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On the bus to the new, less eccentric hostel I'd found online, I thought back to the airport.

I remembered showing the passport.

I remembered the immigration woman looking at it.

I remembered her looking at me.

I remembered her handing it back without a word.

I remembered not being arrested for fraud.

Conclusion: Japanese scientists had a much, much wider reach than I'd ever imagined.

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I stretched out on the new bunk, cyber yellow sun stenciled on the wall behind me, thinking of excuses I could use if I ever managed to get to Fresno.

I delayed, Sadia, but only for a day.

I'm not Hamlet.

Really.

I would've come sooner but all the buses were dead.

All the trains were...

I'm not really Japanese, it's make-up.

I do love you, really...

The door to the room opened and a blonde woman with a hiker's backpack walked in, almost as tall as me. I gave out a polite *hey* then faced the part of the wall with the wind stencil, cutting off all further lines of communication.

The next two weeks...each day...there would be nothing but thoughts of Sadia.

No more distractions.

+

Schedule of those two weeks

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Tuesday: Walked around the area near the hostel, checked out a tar pit that had fake dinosaur bones, had shit food, pretended to read Fahey book, read *Moon Prison*.

Wednesday: Strolled up to the big observatory, recreated the famous laser fight from *Planet Dark* all by myself, had shit food, pretended to read Fahey book, felt dystopian about anarchism, read *Moon Prison*.

Thursday: Took the metro to the nearest uniiversity and tried to blend in, scrolled through *Big Brain Bakunin*, read old Fisher piece, watched vlog of some guy graffiti'ing *OBJECT WAS HERE* on Baudrillard's grave, talked to an American-Serbian girl for a while until her boyfriend showed up, had shit food, read *Moon Prison*.

Friday: Walked around the old Hyperloop station, marveled at the twenty-two metres of track, had shit food, read *Moon Prison*.

Saturday: Walked around, had shit food, read *Moon Prison*.

Sunday: Went to one of the original VR plazas on Sunset, spent an hour working in the mine with the seven dwarves, groped Snow White while she was mopping the floor, felt bad about it, had shit food, read *Moon Prison*.

Monday: Walked around, talked to tall, blonde woman about Japan, had shit food, read *Moon Prison*.

Tuesday: Walked around, had shit food, meandered around wilderness of *Big Brain Bakunin*, stared at Aziz death loop paradox, pretended to read Fahey book, felt utopian about anarchism, fucked very tall blonde woman in hostel toilets.

Wednesday: Walked around, had shit food, returned to the unii, scrolled through *Big Brain Bakunin*, skim-read articles like 'Bol on A.I., Kristeva Wrong About Horror, Exiting The Hotel Beyond The Vampire Castle', pretended to read Fahey book, promised very tall blonde woman I'd visit her in Estonia, thought about Sadia, Sadia, Sadia.

Thursday: Walked around, had shit food, read *Moon Prison*., erased tall blonde woman sex from memory

Friday: Walked around, had shit food, read *Moon Prison*.

Saturday: Walked around, had shit food, read *Moon Prison*.

Sunday: Walked around a retro mall with an *Under-Repair* water slide, had shit food, read *Moon Prison*.

Monday: Walked around Venice Beach, had shit food, read *Moon Prison*.

Tuesday: Walked around Koreatown, tried bus station, still no buses, had shit food, read *Moon Prison*.

Wednesday: Walked around, had shit food, read *Moon Prison*.

Thursday: Walked around, had shit food, pulled out Žižek book, put it back, watched dramatized retelling of 1st International [Marx Kenyan, Guillaume Thai, Bakunin a woman].

Friday: Read in the paper that *Hamlet* performers had been arrested for brawling and train track to Fresno was now open. Ran to train station, got ticket, thought about calling Sadia, remembered I didn't have her number, got on train.

On train: scrolled mindlessly on *Big Brain Bakunin*, felt bad about quitting unii, switched to social theory, read the following from Žižek book a few times, mostly agreed:

However, if you take McClane's actions as a starting point, and the socio-psychological viewpoint implied by his resistance to his wife's career then it becomes clear that this is a man who can only function in a crisis.

When the antagonistic force asserts itself on the plot, McClane becomes heroic through the same qualities that make him misogynistic in the stasis period between crises.

His endgame, as we see through his actions over the course of the film, is not simply to oppose the antagonists, but to oppose his wife...to get her back in the kitchen, if you will.

And it is successful...he wins her trust by killing the threat to her life, the heroic impulse other writers love to intellectualise over, despite such an impulse indulging violent and pathological fantasies, which will clearly erupt again when threatened by other external agency, most probably his wife, I believe, and her desire to prove the 'I' in 'wife'...a desire which acutely conflicts with McClane's subject-view of the world.

+++

Finally, the train arrived at Fresno.

The announcer guy made a joke, saying the name of the train station and claiming it was the only place worth visiting, and an elderly woman giggled two seats down.

I pulled up my rucksack and added another place in my head.

Sadia's house.

Which I had the address of in my phone.

Stepping off onto the platform, I looked around for the ticket gate. Nothing in sight, so I followed the few others who'd disembarked up some piss-stained stairs and over a bridge with two broken windows into the main station area.

It looked fairly modern, which was a surprise as I'd read that a lot of Californian rural infrastructure was falling apart at the seams due to adventurist neglect. Or adventurist redirection of municipal funds to pop-up [gated] estates

But this place...

Ah, not that much of a mystery. Small place, not decrepit, must've had someone important living in town. Or an aggressive mayor. One or the other.

I headed through the ticket gate and straight into the toilets.

Taking a cubicle near the end, I ignored the *Robot Fucking Fallen Robot* graffiti and pissed out what I had, then stood there a while, trying to figure out my next move. Going straight to her place was probably a mistake, especially with my face the way it was. And it was pointless messaging her on the writing site again. Which meant, conversely, adversely, on the other fucking hand, going to her house was the only real option. But how could I just turn up there? It was too bold, my mind didn't have the courage for it, either of them.

Unless I had a few drinks inside me?

Yeah, that could work. Get drunk. Message her. If she didn't respond, which she wouldn't cos she wasn't ever online anymore, take a deep, drunk breath and go there direct.

Flushing the toilet, I moved out of the cubicle and went to the sink. It took me about four minutes of hand waving under three different taps to activate something and another four seconds of hand washing through faintly yellowish water before I realized a guy was staring at me.

'Alright, mate,' I said, squinting at his hazy reflection in the soap-streaked mirror.

He didn't reply.

I considered explaining to him how to turn the tap on, at what angle to place your hands, but he was quite big and guys who stood in toilets just glaring at others were, based on my personal life experience [Japan & Liverpool], capable of anything.

Could have a knife, gun, samurai sword, claw hammer...

'You'll never have her,' the nut said, eventually, wiping his hands on the wall and leaving a spluttered trail of yellow.

‘Sorry?’

‘Not while I’m existent. Existing. In here hole. Wap wap atta tah.’

‘You okay, mate?’

He switched to the mirror, smearing more yellow goo on the glass, then walked a curved line to the door, clipping me on the tip of the shoulder as he went past.

The yellow goo stayed fixed to the wall and the mirror, decorative, sliding down slow like *Satantango*.

‘Psycho...’ I muttered, just as the door was closing shut behind him.

Image and *Scene* pulled out of some old Lynch filmn.

Weird 80’s lunatic in his own little dimension.

Though, as I headed back into the main part of the station, it did give me an idea. Somewhere else I could go to find her.

If it was actually a real place.

If everything she ever said wasn’t in fact lies.

If my two brains didn’t break down on the way over there.

If if if ifffa if...



Lexi sat behind the counter, flicking through a retro magazine from the early 90's.

Most of it was stuff like TOP TEN REASONS TO GET EXCITED FOR *TEEN WOLF 3*, completely dated, but there was one article near the back that stood out; *Satanism, Troubled Youth and a Renewed Threat to the Goat Community*.

She looked up, checking the tables in the caffè area nearby, and then the video shelves at the far end. There was one guy standing in the horror section, but he didn't seem to be picking up any cases, and the tables had the same five customers she'd served earlier.

Hitting the back of her head in a Bōlian attempt to stamp out yet another migraine, she returned to the article:

'By nominal definition, Satanism is built on the altar of Satan. Modern practitioners have, with some success, attempted to befuddle the public by relating it to feminism, to Lilith and her rejection of both Adam, her soulmate, and Eden, the garden of paradise. Yet, the real truth has always lurked behind the curtain, and now in the basements of abandoned warehouses in rural Wisconsin too. This is where young believers in Lucifer have been found fornicating with the corpses

of goats and drinking animal blood from pseudo-medieval goblets bought for bargain prices at Walmart.

Traditionally, Satanism has fed on the apathy of those who sneer at it. The idea that it's a thing to dabble in when you're a teenager but will ultimately leave behind when you settle down into a career. A harmless side-stop on the path to adulthood.'

Lexi put the magazine down, and murdered a whistle.

If the article were my only source, she thought, I'd think Satanists were really nuts. But I've seen quite a few of those old 80's filmns since I started working in this place. I know the real Satanists are corporate CEO's and Libyans.

Actually, Lexi had seen a lot of filmns full stop since she started working at the video-caffé. It's not like there was much else to do. Each shift was a void of eleven hours, and about six of those were spent sitting behind the counter, either staring at her phone or the larger [and flashier] of the two VR plazas across the street.

The only customers they ever got, night or day, were art students, immersion hazers and random groups of hipsters. Mostly art students.

If she had to guess, she'd say they came more for the videos than the caffé part, and even then they never rented any. Just stood there, sketching.

A few days earlier, Lexi had got so bored, she decided to ask one of them - a girl in a beret and scarf [it was eighty-five degrees outside] - what it was she was drawing.

'Concept more than an image.'

'Okay...'

'Sorry, it's quite complex.' The beret girl pointed her pencil at the picture of the T-800 on the case. 'I'm drawing the figure...then later I'll draw the store around it. Maybe some collage elements too.'

'That's a concept?'

'Futurocity. The terminator, representing the future, versus the past...the video store. No offence.'

Lexi stared at the futurist's picture, unimpressed. She was no expert, but it didn't look very good.

'You don't mind, do you?' the girl asked, more assertion than question.

'Not really.' Lexi gestured around the VHS shelves. 'We don't get many customers here in the *past*. Not buying ones anyway. Might as well be useful as an art studio if nothing else.'

'Actually...that was my next question. How *do* you stay in business?'

'Hmm. You'd have to ask the boss about that.'

'And they are...where?'

'Daytime? No idea. Juana only comes in at night. Not much for talking though. Or customer feedback, to be honest.'

'I see.'

Lexi looked at her picture a little longer then turned to walk away.

'You know...the past always eats itself in the end.'

'Excuse me?'

'Your store, this nostalgia business. I don't mean to be the harbinger of doom, but it won't last forever.'

'Nope...guess not.'

There was a knocking sound on the counter, followed by an annoyingly jovial male voice. Either her colleague, Jammer, or a reanimated John Belushi. Probably the former. Lexi yawned, blinked performatively out of the daydream, flashback, dagger memory, whatever it was, and looked up.

'You know, I wish just once they'd pretend like they were actually gonna buy something.'

'What?'

Jammer paused to shove half a panini into his mouth, swallowed with only token chewing, then continued. 'I mean, the whole point of vintage is you buy the shit. You don't just look at it, you own it...physically.'

'Who are you on about?'

'That guy...the art student. Didn't you see him?'

Lexi looked around the video shelves then over at the door, but she was clearly too late. Rotating slowly back round, she asked Jammer what he was doing back so soon.

'Boredom. Big time. Only place nearby is the Lux and if I go in there...whole afternoon's a goner.'

'And the doctor?'

'Nah, took four Panadol instead. Feeling way better now.'

'Four?'

'Got the packet in my bag, if you want some?'

Lexi shook her head, looking at the street outside. 'So you just did nothing for your whole lunch hour?'

'Eating,' he replied, holding up the panini.

'Jesus...'

'Sorry, but we're not exactly overrun with landmarks here.'

'You could've tried the art college.'

'Fuck that.'

'Why not? It might surprise you.'

'Sure, surprise me by being even shitter than I already think it is.'

Lexi shrugged and checked on the customers in the caffè area. Only five left, and they'd all ordered already, but there was a chance at least one of them would have a hand raised for refills.

'Serious, there's no point, we already know it's full of those *ban yeh cunts*. And they're not exactly sociable either. Rather go and wank over a nine hour Bela Tarr filmn than mix with locals like us. Us localians.'

'They're doing exhibitions now,' muttered Lexi, tapping the back of her head again. 'Experimental stuff. Apparently.'

'Come on, it only opened, like, two minutes ago...how are they gonna have exhibitions already?'

'It's what I heard.'

'Fuck that, they're students. What have they got to say about anything? Barely in their twenties, no life experience. No grit. They'll just paint some black square or something and say it's the universe, the bleak house of existence, some shit like that.'

Lexi opened her mouth to argue, but closed it again when the door slid across and another guy walked in. It was weird, usually there were more women than men, but today it was the other way round. And the even weirder thing was, they were all foreign. Well, the new guy might be local, but the other five...all of them spoke with a fairly strong accent.

Kicking the skepticism back a little, she picked up the pad from the counter and took it over to the new guy sitting with an oddball grin in the booth by the window.

'Hi there, what'll it be?' she asked, holding out the pad.

'Blueberry pie,' he said back in a rough accent, possibly Greek, not even looking at the menu.

'Anything else?'

'No.'

'Okay then.'

She returned to the counter, trying to pin the voice to a country.

'And another thing,' continued Jammer, apparently unaware that she'd left and come back, 'art colleges don't even make good artists. It's true, name me one famous artist who actually went to art college, who actually studied art...'

'Blueberry pie for the new guy.'

'...there's not even one. What, blueberry pie? Serious?'

She nodded.

'Jesus in a diode, we'll be cleaned out soon...there's like three slices left.'

'Yeah, it is kinda weird.'

'Not weird, fucking bizarro. Every guy comes in, blueberry pie. Every guy comes in, foreigner. Every guy comes in, guy.'

'You noticed that too?'

'I notice everything, everywhere, at all times.'

'Right.'

'And another weird thing...none of them are looking at the videos.'

'Yeah...that part's not weird.'

'Which means Juana is gonna scold us again. Force us to watch *Videodrome* for the four hundredth time. Fuck, my headache's coming back just thinking about it.'

'Long as it's not *Robocop 2*...'

Lexi looked around and saw one of the earlier customers with his hand in the air, like it was school time or something. Didn't these foreigners know how to shout?

She walked over with her pad, but there was no need as all he asked for was coffee. In fact, he asked without even looking up; his head was stuck in some book that was either called *Chants de Maldoror* or *Lautréamont*.

Returning to the counter, she picked up the coffee pot and poured some out. Stirred it a little. Added milk. Then, arriving back to the table, she asked him where he was from. This time he put the book down and looked at her.

'France.'

She asked him what had brought him to a little out of the way town like this.

'This is a city, no?'

'Fresno...sure, I guess some people call it that, but it's not one of the famous ones. Usually people go to LA or San Diego or San Fran. To be honest, they'll go to Bakersfield before they ever come here.'

'Oh...well, my girlfriend lives in Fresno. This is why I come.'

'Ah, sweet. Is she a local girl?'

'Yes, local.'

She was about to ask him how they met, but Jammer yelled out, saying the order for blueberry pie was waiting on the side.

'Sorry, I gotta go...'

The Frenchman nodded without emotion and went back to his book.

'Where's this one from?' asked Jammer, smirking. 'Italy? Portugal?'

'France.'

'Ah. Frenchman...that's why.'

'What?'

'Tell me, is it you seducing him or him taking a shot at you?'

'Seriously?'

'Come on, I'm not fucking blind. You were talking to him for ages, way more than you ever talk to the ugly ones.'

'Just being polite.'

'Sure...and it's merely a coincidence he's French, right?'

'Just get the coffee, Belushi Face.'

Lexi picked up the pie and took it over to the new guy, who was now surveying a map with scrunched eyebrows. She glanced over as she got close and saw it was Fresno.

'There you go,' she said, laying down the plate. 'One slice of blueberry pie.'

'Thank you,' he replied, in a foreign accent.

She turned to head back to the counter, but something intervened, forcing her to turn around again and bug the new guy. 'Sorry for intruding, but...are you French too?'

'No.'

The man stared at her, mouth half open, either to add more or just make it easier to breathe.

'Okay...never mind.'

The door opened and another male customer walked in, a guy in a *FILA* shirt and *FILA* jogging bottoms. Jesus...

Lexi went straight over and directed him to a booth with a *Beverly Hills Cop* poster on the wall, asking if he wanted any coffee to start things off.

'I would like one of the blueberry pie. You have this?'

'Slice of blueberry pie, yeah, we still got a couple.'

'I want this. Thank you.'

'Okay...any coffee?'

'No.'

She smiled and walked away, thinking, fuck, it really is like some other country in here today. And every one of them wants blueberry pie. Was this a prank? One of those clama vlogs?

'Another slice of blueberry pie,' she said when she got back to the counter, lowering her voice a little.

Jammer grunted and told her Fresno was probably the new melting pot or something, and the town council had forgotten to inform everyone.

'Yeah, but it doesn't make much sense. We're in the middle of nowhere. Ask most Americans, they don't even know where Fresno is...or what it is. How did these guys hear about us?'

Belushi Face shrugged and passed her another plate of blueberry pie.

'You okay?'

'Might need another Panadol.'

'God, just go to the doctor, will you?'

'You first.'

She muttered, 'fuck's sake,' under her breath then carried the pie back to the table, asking the customer again if he wanted anything else.

'No, this is okay. Thank you.'

'You just visiting too?' she asked, staring at the plate.

'What do you mean, visiting?'

'Nothing, I'm just curious...we've had a lot of customers the last few days, all of them from overseas. I was just wondering if the UN was in town or something.'

'The UN? I don't understand.'

'Never mind, it's just a little thing of mine. Enjoy your pie.'

'I'm here to see my girlfriend, not for UN,' he explained, tone about as robotic as it was possible to get.

'Wah, another girlfriend.'

'Yes, she lives here.'

'Fresno must be the new Paris. What's her name? Maybe I know her?'

'I do not think you know.'

'You'd be surprised...this place is smaller than you think.'

'No, you do not know. Very certain.'

He picked up the fork, smiled like a Slovak robot and dug into his pie.

'Okay, mystery man,' Lexi mumbled to herself as she headed back to the counter. 'See how far that attitude gets you.'

She sat down on the same stool as before and looked around the caffè, counting out the numbers.

Seven people. And not one of them local.

Her hand poured out some coffee on autopilot, the other one grinding knuckles into the side of her skull, both stopping immediately when she saw Jammer raising eyebrows in her direction.

It was weird...there was that girl a few weeks back, they said that was probably a guy from out of town too. And now these ones. Was Fresno on a list she didn't know about? Some kind of creep haven for dirty foreign guys who liked young girls?

The door slid open and yet another man walked in. This one looked young, eighteen maybe. He was also Asian, Chinese if she had to guess. Which she really didn't want to cos there was an eighty-nine per cent chance she was wrong.

'I reckon that just about covers all five continents...!' said Jammer, laughing awkwardly, a fifth Panadol in hand.

'Yeah.'

Lexi watched the new guy take the booth with the *Puppet Master 2* poster, and noticed one or two of the other foreigners watching him too. Maybe it's not the UN, maybe it's an inter-gang rumble, she thought.

The potentially [eleven per cent] Chinese man called her over, looked at the menu then ordered an americano and a slice of blueberry pie.

She didn't bother to write it down.

'You here to see your girl, too?'

'Sorry, what?'

'Are you coming to see your girlfriend? Here, in Fresno?'

He looked up at her, hands closing the menu like a bible.

'No, I don't have a girlfriend.'

'Never mind then. We've got a plentiful supply around here. I'm sure you'll find something.'

She walked back to the counter and told Jammer to get another slice of infinite blueberry pie.

'Mother of all God,' he said, adding a stuttered whistle.

'Yup.'

'Getting really freaky now.'

'Told you.'



Tsukubashi-faced [without the Oort Cloud paranoia], I watched the waitress walk back to the counter, the notepad almost slipping out of her hand either from fatigue or job apathy.

What did she mean by the girlfriend thing? Did she know why I was here? Had Sadia come in and told her about me? Warned her?

I picked up the menu and stared at the overly-saturated pie pics, putting my doubts as caption bubbles nearby.

She doesn't know, it's impossible. I mean, how could she? Sadia always came here, so technically it wouldn't be impossible but... telling a waitress about some guy she was talking to online...that was just silly.

But what about the girlfriend comment?

I lifted the menu to almost eye level and did a slow pivot to the counter, performing a covert study. *Kuso*, she was actually quite pretty...the basics of her...but,

facially, absolutely exhausted. Eyebags like something dark...commas...or apostrophes flipped on the side. Fuck, how long was her shift? Four months? And the other staff member, the tall guy, looked even worse. Like he hadn't slept in a full calendar year.

The waitress glanced up, just to the left of my position, forcing a deft redirect to a booth nearby.

Sitting there, very straight, was a man wearing a tartan scarf, on his own, eating unidentified pie. Not even the slightest bit interested in the *Beverly Hills Cop* poster on the wall next to him. Or the other 80's film posters plastered up everywhere else.

Swatting away the word *hypocrite*, I looked at the poster on my own wall and tutted. *Puppet Master 2*. I knew that one. Had watched it on *GENTE+* one time, drunk, at three in the morning. The drilling puppet and the witch in the revealing dress that vomited up leeches. Fairly decent animatronics, too, give or take a few murder scenes.

Beneath the poster was a selection of cut out reviews, printed and pasted up: *Leech woman exits way too early. Chemical in puppets doesn't make sense. Frustratingly inconsistent: sometimes they're invincible, other times UN military.*

My memory was a little hazy, but I did remember the drilling puppet getting stamped on pretty easily. Was that what happened? If Sadia were around, I could ask her. She'd probably sat in the same seat at some point, read the same reviews. Elbows on this table, Nordic-pixie face in the same airspace as mine. Surrounded by men too shy to come and talk to her cos she was too pretty and too introverted and too-...

The beeping device on the door rang, pulling me back.

For some reason, the guy in the tartan scarf was standing there, staring out onto the street. Not leaving, just staring. He stayed that way for about ten more seconds then slid the door shut and returned to his pie.

That was weird.

Was he expecting to see someone out there?

I looked around the rest of the diner. There were seven other guys, all eating pie, all on their own. No women at all, apart from the tired waitress.

What was this place, a lonely hearts community? It'd been the same in the barr the night before. Eleven guys, two women, everyone drinking alone. And no one picking up. That one woman, mustard-yellow top, trying to sit next to one of the other guys, putting her bag down on the stool, asking if he wanted to buy her a drink, not bad-looking either, and the guy just ignored her.

Did the men here not want sex?

Did they have insanely high standards?

Okay, the woman wasn't at the Sadia level, or Syria level, but she wasn't Mosaic Garr either.

What was going on?

The song on the speakers changed, playing something straight-up etherwave. Or maybe it was original 80's. Hard to tell.

Rotating my phone in small circles on the table, I subtly glanced over at the guy closest to me. There was a piece of paper on the table in front of him, the text in blood red capitals, almost readable.

Was that *SAD*?

Perhaps an *I* and an *A* after it?

You're paranoid, popped into my head, Tsukubashi level, but I curbed it fast. Things weren't that bad. Besides it wasn't paranoia if they really were all out to get Sadia. And that wasn't the craziest theory in the world...not even irrational. I mean, if she'd mentioned this place to me, she'd probably told others about it too. And I knew she'd messaged other guys, it was right there on the site, in clear blocks of text. Probably given out her e-mail too. And...if I'd bothered to come all the way here, why wouldn't they?

My head spun, past the posters, over to the counter. The waitress was picking up what had to be my coffee, so I got up and intercepted. She froze a little, stuttering the words *table okay*, but by then the coffee was already in my hands.

'It's only a few feet,' she protested, making no move to win back the cup.' I'm pretty sure I can make it.'

'You look like you need the rest,' I replied, nodding awkwardly as I played back the line in my head, matched it to her Gena Rowlands death stare, realised I'd just called her tired, then wiped everything clean and walked back to the table. On the way, I stalled near the note-writing guy, peeking over his shoulder at the paper. After hovering for two seconds, I muttered, 'almost dropped it,' to my coffee cup and continued on to the *Puppet Master 2* poster.

For the next few minutes, I sat there, in my little booth, stirring coffee.

Not a hundred per cent certain, but that paper he was looking at, it definitely had something that looked like Sadia's name on it. Either that or SADISM.

But it couldn't have been that...there was no *M*. No second *S* either.

No, it was Sadia. Had to be.

And there was a street name, too. That one I was sure of...cos I had the same name written down, on my phone and the back-up piece of paper in my jeans pocket. It was her address, without a doubt.

If that guy had it too then...what?

A race to see who could get there first?

The waitress appeared holding the blueberry pie. 'Here it is...the last slice. Table delivery.'

'Thanks.'

'One minute after your coffee.'

The sarcasm wasn't hidden, but I wasn't sure exactly what she was being sarcastic about so I just replied with another *thanks*.

'I'm kinda curious,' she continued, sliding the plate onto the table. 'Did you hear about this somewhere?'

'Sorry?'

'This caffè, the pie...did you read about it somewhere? Or did someone tell you about us?'

I looked at her, wondering again if she might know Sadia. Then almost instantly ruling it out.

Nah, I was right before, it wouldn't make sense. Did the waitress in my old college canteen know me? No chance. Anyway, even if Sadia came in here every day,

it didn't mean she ever talked to the staff...and she never mentioned them in her messages. Just the 80's style video theme and the back room.

'It's one of my favourite pies,' I answered finally, digging the fork into the pastry as a figurative full stop.

'You and everyone else in here.' She smiled, a little forced, and walked away.

I drank some coffee and looked at the fork sticking out of the pie.

That was it...the pie Sadia always raved about. The pie she wanted to eat with me one day, sharing the same spoon.

I picked up the fork again and took a bite.

Uhm. It was definitely blueberry. And salt. And overpowering sourness.

I managed a few more bites before putting the fork down and deciding it was never a good thing to pretend to like something for someone who wasn't even there. Even if she were, would she care?

Probably not.

My brain went to her bedroom at home, watching as she typed out some of that *burning girl* stuff, not caring about school or friends, waiting for someone interesting, someone foreign to come along and rescue her. Then diving into a swimming pool and fingering herself under the surface. Asking if I wanted to jump on her. In her room instead of mine. With a Japanese face staring back at me.

I opened my eyes and stared at the puppets on the wall.

Sadia. Sadia. Sadia. Sadia. Sadia. Sadia. Sadia...

No detours.

No maelstrom, no swirls.

Focus.

Pulling out the piece of paper from my pocket, I traced every letter of her address.

That's where I had to go.

Wild Cat Lane.

I looked at the guy a few tables over, and thought about him getting there before me.

Kuso, maybe it wasn't just him either...maybe there were more? What if I'd waited too long already?

An image of twenty, thirty guys lined up outside her house, all holding bouquets of black flowers came into my head. And there I was at the very back...number thirty one. Holding a plastic daffodil.

Jesus...

I got up, took the bill to the counter and apologised to the waitress for not eating more pie but there was somewhere I had to go.

'The art museum?'

'Sorry?'

'It's brand new, just down the road from here.'

'Oh. Not today, no. Maybe tomorrow.'

‘The train station then?’

‘Ha, not there either. Not yet.’

She opened her mouth to say more, but it turned into a yawn and after that she probably realized that there was nothing much to add as we didn’t know each other. Which was a shame, as despite the general aura of exhaustion, she still looked like quite pretty. And present. In the flesh. Right in front of me as physical...thing.

Taking the change, I looked back at the *Puppet Master 2* poster. ‘This place is quite unique. The execution of it...concept-wise...’

‘I’ll let my boss know, she designed it.’

‘Is she here?’

‘Hmm. Not until sunset usually.’

I nodded, looking around at the seven other men and seeing two of them staring back. ‘Maybe I’ll come back sometime. Try a different pie.’

‘Well, there’s a fairly good chance I’ll be the one here to serve it to you.’

‘And me,’ shouted the tall guy to the side, winking.

‘Ignore him, he’s taken five Panadol.’

‘Okay, err...see you around sometime. Maybe.’

‘Yeah.’

I smiled at her, and the tall guy to the side, and then finally listened to the voice in my brain saying, *get out the door, find Sadia*, and the voice behind it, screaming,

what the fuck are you doing? It's a waitress, you're a customer, she doesn't give a grainy shit about you, and walked out of the caffè.

+

The Seven Men In The Caffé [brief notes]

+

The first man, next to the *Beverly Hills Cop* poster, was from France. He'd seen Sadia's profile on a dating site, but had never been able to break into conversation with her. She'd replied, but only two or three lines each time. Then, one day, after watching the *Lilya 4-Ever* remake, he'd gone back to the site, seen her home town on her profile details, booked a flight and now there he was, ashamed, depressed, expectant.

+

The second man, beside the *Critters* poster, was from Ireland. He'd always wanted a literary girl, as he was a poet himself, so he'd joined as many writing sites as he could find for the sole purpose of fucking a poet. So far, he'd fallen in love with five women, and Sadia was third on the list. His plan: to ask each of them to run away with him, reasoning that out of a total of five, one of them had to say yes. The first one he'd visited, in Miami, called the police. The second, on the fringes of Denver, used pepper spray. Sadia was lucky number three.

+

The third man, beneath the *Night Of The Demons* poster, originated in Turkey. He'd seen Sadia on the writing site and had recently come into some money so, why the fuck not, he'd thought, and booked the flight. He'd talked to her quite a

lot and she'd always ended her messages with xxx so he figured he had a better shot than most. Of all the men, he was probably the least coiled.

+

The fourth and fifth men were both from Denmark, had both met Sadia on a dating site, yet only one of them felt [fleetingly] embarrassed about coming all this way to try and pick up an eighteen year old high school girl. The other one was simply determined. He'd messaged her, she'd replied, he'd told her his issues, his anxieties and she'd responded with her own. There's something special about this one, he told himself over and over and over [and over].

+

The sixth man, by the *Phantasm 2* poster, was a wild card. Italian, unemployed, lived off the money picked up from hustling and gambling in each town he ended up in, Cronenberg fan, teetotal, other stuff. Usually, when he was moving to the next place, he would go online and search for women who lived there, women he could seduce in advance. Sadia had written back, saying she loved Italian culture, and, to him, that was enough to give Fresno a shot. But, by the time he'd arrived a few days ago, she'd stopped messaging him. In fact, he hadn't had a message in over two and half weeks.

+

The seventh man, frowning at the *Reanimator* poster, was from Scotland. Older than the others, he saw himself as a teacher for young Sadia, an educator, and eventually, a lover. He'd masturbated for weeks over her avatar, exchanged messages, typed out long e-mails where he'd offered advice on what to read, what to see, what to listen to etc., and she'd written back calling him her *life-guide*. That's when he'd made the decision to come. First to New York then cross country, masturbating in every motel room, picturing the two of them together, her young, naked form in his

hands...eyes awed, sacred as they viewed the fucking. But then he'd arrived. Hard and Dionysian. And she wasn't replying anymore.

'Peithoian whore...'
he muttered, digging nails into his skin, eyes on the green mist swirling out of the *Reanimator* test tube.



Emerging El Topo-like outside, I took in the pharmacy opposite, counted out half the queue then walked left down the street until I found a collection of bus stops. The giant *FRESNO GRAPE FEST* poster stamped on the shelter [flanked by smaller versions promoting the same event] had some effect, but not enough to stop my finger running through the route listing. Herndon. Tarpey. Inspiration Park. Gordon. Most of the names were just empty signifiers, but there was one route with Wild Cat Lane - final stop, Prather - so I sat down, put my bag on the chipped part of the bench and waited.

The bus took a while.

More than a while.

Half an hour and not one stopped, not even by accident.

I stretched out my legs, almost clipping a woman passing by.

Behind me, a waitress from the *REAL THAI YEAH* takeaway spot I'd been tempted to try earlier, shouted, 'green curry, tom yung soup,' seemingly on loop.

Nope, not looking that way.

Or at my shoes.

Where else?

Back down the street, opposite the video caffè, two VR plazas vied for attention; one white and minimalist, clearly a franchise, and the other visibly on its last legs. *Visibly* cos the biggest poster in the window was the fading classic *MARS OR MEH*, a game so old even my mum knew it.

All the other shoppes were either garish, fusion restaurants or minor tech stores selling shit like patch cleaners and earphones.

I pulled my legs back in, making space for the sudden rush of people traffic.

This was Fresno then.

Or one street of it.

Not exactly Osaka or Ljubljana.

More like a place holder, a rough sketch, do-for-now city waiting for its upgrade to arrive. Which, under the adventurist system, would probably take about half a millennium.

No wonder Sadia wanted to leave.

Was that too harsh?

Maybe.

The video caffè was okay...a bit extreme on the 80's retro...but not unbearable.

And there was that *Puppet Master 2* poster...

The other people around the shelter started muttering, shuffling, reaching into jacket pockets, and, when I looked down the street, I realized why. The bus was coming. My one. Hopefully with enough room inside cos there was no way I was waiting another hour for the next one.

+++

Turned out room was not a problem as, apart from the driver and myself, there were only two other passengers on the whole bus.

The loudest was an old man sitting near the front, yapping constantly at the driver, who was doing his best to ignore him. As the pensioner was a bit deaf, his voice was twice as loud, so me and the other passenger could hear him boasting about how his second favourite nephew had recently become the personal assistant to someone big on one of the network shows based in LA. He wasn't very happy about it though, as the kid didn't talk to him anymore. In fact, the little punk hadn't talked to him in years. At this point, he swore right into the driver's ear, and was told to stop talking and sit the F down [driver's words].

The other passenger was a quiet type, young, bland-looking, not particularly well-built. He was sitting near the back reading something, a piece of paper. Not his phone. Not the GRAPE FEST sticker that seemed to be on the back of every seat. An actual piece of physical paper.

Poetry?

An address?

Her Address?

No, something about him definitely seemed off. Perhaps the way he kept looking at the roof of the bus and muttering...or maybe the fact that it was a single piece of paper clutched in his hand and not a notepad.

But then I probably looked off too.

My phone beeped, a pop-up ad telling me about a new dildo store at the next stop.

Kuso...

Did they even try anymore?

Fucking adventurers.

+++

The bus left the city blocks and hit a short stretch of highway, moving past almond fields with signs advertising Almond Marts in LA, Bakersfield, San Fran,

Portland in North Cali, Accra etc., AH-Bots in orange groves, an ADOPT-A-COW depot, stray cows, stray dogs, real estate billboards selling genuine family farms [plus family] and then, finally, into an area that looked like generic suburbs, even though Fresno itself was so far away at that point that it may as well have been a fresh metropolis.

I looked out of the window, at some of the houses and gardens and advert holo signs in between, and tried to picture Sadia walking around there. Which ones would she choose? The grungiest sprang to mind, as she was a poet, and didn't poets like dirt and chaos?

The bus stopped and the driver shouted back, 'this is your stop.'

I put the bag on my shoulder and got up, and the quiet guy at the back of the bus did the same, following me down the aisle. Then beeped his card against the exit point to cover the extortionate, inter-zone surcharge.

Kuso...

We were going to the same place?

+++

With the bus gone, I checked the map on my phone and figured out where on Wild Cat Lane her house would be.

The other guy...one piece of paper guy...stood rigid behind me, checking an actual, physical map.

Okay, you miming fuck...

I started walking down the pavement ahead, at a fairly swift speed, and, after passing the first house [plus front lawn holo sign shilling neck insurance], looked back. He was still studying the map, face practically rubbing against it.

An incompetent stalker. Good.

Fucking up a *Dark Planet* theme whistle, I continued on, examining every house I walked past, looking into every window in case I was wrong and she was

inside, tutting at every holo ad, walking past a few residents walking their dogs, walking past others who were just walking themselves, walking generally, mindlessly, mindfully until I reached a curve in the street with a small forest latched on at the end.

Okay, this had to be it.

I checked behind again and saw the map guy about a hundred metres down the road. He was moving at a controlled *late for work* pace to catch up and, although there were now shades blocking his eyes, it seemed very much like he was staring right at me.

Kasu, he wasn't a big guy, I could take him...if it came to that.

Turning back, I quickly reviewed the number of her house on my phone map [I'd typed it in before I came] then carried on down the final limb of the street.

A lot of the houses, these and ones I'd already passed, not only had stupid fucking holo ads outside, but also the California flag hanging over their porches. A precious few had the old US flag. One house had a different flag entirely; I didn't know which one exactly, but it was red and green with a small bird in the corner. Portuguese, maybe. Was that a joke?

Another house near the end of the street had a police car parked outside.

I walked closer and checked the number on the door.

Kuso, it was hers.

Through the window I could see one of the cops, surprisingly lithe, and a blonde middle-aged woman talking to him, so I kept on walking, stopping a couple of houses farther down and studying a particularly gigantic tree [fuck the holo ad!].

With not a lot of subtlety, I checked back on Sadia's place.

The map guy got there a few minutes later, saw the police car, stopped, looked over at me and my tree, waited for what must've been more than three minutes then turned and scurried back the way he'd come.

Yeah, you better run...

I watched him all the way until he braked ten houses down, sliding awkwardly into the exact same thing I was doing.

What brand of fucking tree is that, I wanted to ask, aware that I didn't know the answer either.

Larch?

Elm blossom?

Not palm?

Creepy fuck.

+++

We both stood there fake tree studying for nearly an hour.

Finally, two cops came out of Sadia's house, the blonde woman a couple of yards behind, arms folded. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but, based on the body language, it seemed to be more than a little tense. And brief, thanks gods. Cops got in the car, woman tightened her arms, scene done.

Move, move, move, you fucking slug.

Yup, good idea.

I waited until the cop car was out of sight then, without looking, rushed over to the house.

My rival farther down the street had a similar idea, but, when he spotted me flying along, he glitched like a coward and went back to his tree.

I smirked, remembering the guy in the LA hostel.

'Come on then, *kasu*.'

Then called myself *kasu* and refocused.

The front door to the house was half open. I thought about strolling up and ringing the bell, but what would I say?

Hi, I'm Mark from the internet. Is Sadia home?

No, too weird.

I needed time to prepare.

To think up better bullshit.

Putting my head down, I moved round the side of the porch. There was a path between each of the houses, and I followed it along until the dirt spilled out onto a field of more dirt and occasional grass. Nothing much there, no cows or crops, no sign saying what it was supposed to be, so I walked back, pausing by a tree near Sadia's back garden. It wasn't the biggest, and the foliage was minimal, but it was enough to keep me covert.

Assuming I could climb up...

Reaching up towards the lowest branch, I quickly realized I couldn't.

Unless...

I took a few steps back and ran at the trunk, leaping upwards when I was almost level and grabbing for the branch. I got it, but the bark was rough, and my fingers couldn't get enough of a grip to pull the rest of my 80kg mass up there. Muffling a groan, I let go and dropped back down to the ground.

Not much else to do then.

Except ring the doorbell.

Or...

I walked back down the path between the houses and onto the field of 78% dirt. There was still fuck all to see so I turned ninety degrees and followed the same path alongside the backs of the houses until I found a skip full of old laptops and plastic and metal and miscellaneous shit that had been thrown out. I rummaged a bit, picked out a limited A.I. vacuum bot, accidentally triggered the start cleaning voice, threw it back in, and that was about it. *Kuso*, a vacuum bot, just dumped like one of those old NeoGeos. What a fucking waste. A half-broken crate next to the skip seemed to agree with me, wobbling a bit as a breeze passed through. But it didn't fall down. Ah, a gift from the non-existent gods. I picked up one of its legs and carried it back to the path, briefly wondering why I was actually doing this.

Investigation?

Didn't matter, there was another GRAPE FEST sticker on the back of a fence and that held my hand until I got back to the Sadia tree and put the crate down.

Right, action time.

I looked up at the window, the one I'd be able to peer into when I was on the branch. It had to be a bedroom, that high up. Hers?

My head tilted back, checking the pavement ten houses down for the other guy, but he wasn't there.

It was all clear.

Stepping onto the crate, I reached up for the branch. It seemed a lot lower now, low enough to wrap my hand round it, bend my arm a little to push myself off the crate and, with a slight bump, get my chest onto the bulk of it. The rest was easy and, after brushing away some loose twigs, I quickly settled into spy mode.

Kuso...

Instant dejection.

Not abject, but...

The room opposite was empty.

Utterly void of Sadia.

There were posters on the wall, but it was too far away to see what they were. Some kind of machine on the bedside table, but again, it was too distant to tell what it was.

I shifted back against the trunk and waited.

Ten minutes, fifteen, twenty...

No one came, inside the house or down in the garden, male or female, clothed or just out of the shower.

My ass started to get numb.

As a distraction, I snapped twigs off the branch and threw them at targets on the ground, mostly flowers and shrubs growing on the path. That worked for a couple more minutes, but then the questions grew louder.

What the hell was I doing?

Spying?

Perving?

Wasn't I supposed to be thinking up bullshit to spin to her mum?
What did I actually expect to see in her bedroom?
Ghost image of her taking her bra off?
Shoving a quill in her muff?
I threw the last twig, hitting a spider lily.
Where the fuck are you, Sadia?

+++

Straightening out the mystery creases on my *Damijana Chu* hoodie, I stood in front of the door to her house, which was still slightly ajar, and rang the bell.

The map guy who'd been waiting ten houses farther down [my covert enemy] seemed to have disappeared completely, but perhaps he was still there, hiding more effectively.

Whatever. Didn't matter now.

I coughed several times, trying to clear my throat and making it three times worse.

The door ghosted open and a little blonde girl materialised.

'Hi,' I croaked, raising an awkward hand.

'Are you a Mormon?' she asked, sharp, hand on the edge of the door.

'Sorry, I'm-...' I coughed again, three times. 'I know your sister...Sadia.'

'Muuuuuuuum,' she shouted back into the house.

'No, it's okay, I'm not a Mormon, I'm a friend of Sadia's from-...'

The blonde, middle-aged woman who'd dealt with the cops earlier appeared behind the little girl, her arms instantly resuming their previous folding motif when she caught sight of me. Or caught sight of my face. Or the half-naked, Chinese sci-fi queen on my hoodie.

'Who are you?' she asked.

'Hi, I was just telling your daughter, I'm a friend of Sadia.'

'Yes, but who are you?'

'Sorry, I'm Mark.'

The Muuuuum looked past me, onto the street, looking for...what? The police car? Cameras?

'Look, I'm not sure if this is weird or not, maybe it is, but I know Sadia from a writing website, on the internet. You know?'

'Yes, we're aware of the internet,' she replied, caustic.

I laughed, not very convincingly, faking an itch on my chest so I could cover Damijana Chu's *Barbarella*-esque space suit.

'What do you want?'

'I was wondering...is Sadia here?'

'Are you Chinese?'

'Am I-...oh, you mean the face. No, I'm from Liverpool, I'm Northern British.'

She toured my face, the eyes, the cheeks, the chin, the Chinese girl on my hoodie, shaking her head.

'You look Chinese.'

I was stuck again.

'Yeah...is Sadia around? Can I talk to her?'

'Sadia never talked about knowing any Chinese guys. She never-...!' The mum stopped, wiping her eye or her cheek. 'Look, what exactly do you want? Are you a reporter?'

'Reporter? No, no, no...I'm a student. College student. I was just wondering if I could...if Sadia was here, maybe I could talk to her?'

'Sadia's gone, college student.'

She put her hand on the frame of the door...

'Okay. Do you know when she'll be back?'

...and, without ceremony, pushed it shut.

I stood there for a few seconds, looking at the triangular bell. She's angry as it is, I warned myself, another push and she might...what? Lunge for me?

Turning slowly, I headed back down the drive, making sure to avoid the grass in case she was watching from the window.

At the end of the drive I looked right, towards the path and the pervert tree.

No, not again, you wretch...way too weird.

I pivoted left and saw the map guy. He was standing a little closer now, maybe eight or seven houses down, with the sunglasses perched on top of his head.

Who the fuck was this clown?

An actual stalker?

Insurance agent?

Fingers stretched, I started towards him, plucking theories out of mid-air nothingness.

He was after her. And the police were after him because...because he was creepy. Yes, had to be. If he were genuine, he wouldn't be sneaking down to her house one tree at a time.

But then, didn't I just climb a tree and sleaze into her bedroom window?

Yeah...but no. Fuck, *kuso*, that wasn't the same. That was...no, it was completely different. Andi Chopra did the same thing in *Halt Vacation 2* and it was seen as romantic. Relatively. Well, he got a fuck out of it. So did Jess Esser in *Got What?* Exact same thing, up a tree, bedroom stakeout, romantic. Not sleazy at all. *And* I went to the front door, I presented myself to the family. Map guy never did that. Never had the guts to do that. Neither did Andi Chopra. Or Jess Esser.

Kuso...these fucking perverts.

This fucking map guy.

Giving my target another scan, I realized he must've been slouching earlier as he was now about the same height as me. Possibly taller cos I was still about twenty metres away. But his arms were skinny, they'd never lifted bars, and when he saw me marching towards him, the poor wretch couldn't look straight; his eyes went

to the road, the house he was standing next to, the tree above his head, anywhere but the fierce Japanese guy.

Yeah, the creepy little fuck was scared.

Good.

Kanzen da yo.

'What you doing here?' I shouted, one house away.

He pulled his sunglasses down and looked at me, dark filtered.

'You after Sadia?'

Straightened himself up.

'Sadia. My fucking girlfriend.'

'What?'

Only a few yards away now, hand ready to swing.

I said, she's my fucking girlfriend, *kasu.*'

He backed onto the grass, one hand rising up arthritic in defence. 'Look, I don't know what you think you're-...'

I got close, a single step away, and swung.

The guy staggered back from it, dodging to some degree, but too fast to stay on his feet.

Pushing forward with full lunatic momentum, I swung again, this time getting him on the side of the head. Then another, and another, the third one connecting with the bone of the guy's nose.

Blood trickled out, and he started to moan.

'Get fuck off me...get off...'

I raised my hand again, but didn't strike. Instead, I put my hoodie sleeve against his nose and wiped some of the blood off. 'Too much,' I said, confused at my own words.

'Fucking psycho...caveman...'

The front door of the nearest house creaked open and an old man stepped out. He ambled quite slowly down the steps onto the grass, a tennis racket in his right hand.

'Get off him, son,' he said, tapping the head of his makeshift weapon against the holo sign with *SCALP INSURANCE* in red capitals.

I stretched out my sleeve, got off.

'Police are on the way, so you just stay there and don't move, okay? Just keep still and-...'

'You don't understand, I saw him watching your house. Just now. Asked him what he was doing and he swung for me. That's what happened. I swear.'

'Son, is that true?' he asked, leaning his whole body towards the guy with blood smeared on his face.

'Are you blind? He hit me, he's fucking lying.'

'Son, there's no need for that kind of language.'

'What were you doing outside his house then?' I asked the bleeder.

'Fuck you...psycho fucking nip.'

I looked at the old man and told him the police should probably be asking this guy some questions, unless, of course, he knew him. The old man shook his head, and said, 'no, son, can't say I do.'

'Well then, like I said,' I replied, then walked off, heading back down the street to the bus stop, the other pervert's blood smeared all over my hoodie sleeve.

+++

To no surprise whatsoever, the whole sidewalk was deserted.

No seats, no bus shelter, no choice but to put myself on the ground like a teenager and stare at the *GRAPE FEST* promo opposite.

'Sit on the ground, we can be like animals,' I mumbled, picturing a Japanese guy with moving lips saying the same thing, and a name too...Hide...

What the...

Then someone else, another line, 'they dropped me, Keni, no way back.'

I reached for my phone and looked at the numbers, trying to remember what I was supposed to dial. Had to phone someone, didn't I? Before, sometime...when? A while ago, but...I was sure I had to call back.

Kuso, not again.

I looked up at the sun, begging it to burn away all the Japanese faces in my head, all the sporadic language inserts.

Somehow it worked, everything evaporated.

No more Japanese.

Just pure Cali sunshine.

I put away the phone, breathed out long and then started counting ants on the pavement.

+++

A few minutes later, the old man shuffled down the road, still holding the tennis racket.

When he got close enough I asked him where the lunatic was.

'Ran off, I'm afraid. Too spry for an old guy like me.'

'Will the police get him?'

'Hard to say, son, hard to say. Local ones are a little tied up nowadays.'

'Ah well. Probably won't come back now he knows you've got a tennis racket.'

The old man laughed. 'Son, if you'd been any bigger, I woulda been armed for mountain lion.'

I laughed, half annoyed that he didn't think I was big already. Couldn't remember exactly, but I was pretty sure I could bench somewhere in the region of one forty. Who else would be bigger than that...outside of bodybuilding comps?

'Good job I'm tiny then,' I said, finally.

'I wouldn't go that far.'

'Nah, guess not.'

He asked what I was doing there anyway. As far as he knew there weren't any other Chinese in the area [the guy clearly didn't know much...I'd seen at least thirty other Asian guys since I'd been there].

I told him I was Scouse.

He said it was strange, but okay, he could let it go.

We talked a little more, about the area, the old states, the crime rate, the culture of the Chinese, whether or not I knew kung fu. I told him I didn't, but did have enough boxing training to handle myself. Didn't bother saying I wasn't Chinese.

After nodding five hundred times, he left.

Ten yards down the road, he half turned, told me to watch myself. 'There's been trouble here lately, something dark, so...just a warning.'

I smiled and said I could handle myself, mouthing *thank fuck* when I saw the front of the bus turn the corner down the road.

'Yeah, suppose you can. But still, what happens to a young girl like that...ain't asking much to look around a little...be vigilant.'

'Sorry, young girl?'

The bus stopped near my feet and the door hissed open.

'Poor girl down the street there,' the old man said, pointing back with his tennis racket. 'Guess you didn't hear about it being a tourist and all.'

'Hear what?'

'Got taken by some loon...or she ran off with him...they're not really sure. But I'll tell you this, it's the biggest news ever happened round these parts, that's for sure.'

'Wait...taken by who? Where did she-...'

'You getting on, guy?' interrupted the driver, tone like a Mong Kok waiter.

I looked over at the bus doors, the sur-charge device clamped to the glass, the cloud of simmering rage around the driver, and then back at the old man.

'Well?'

I shook my head, adding a pointless *I'll take the next one.*

'Great. Thanks for letting me pull over and not pick you up.'

The doors closed and the bus [plus irate driver fumes] disappeared towards the highway, leaving me with the old man and his tennis racket.

'Sorry, can you start again?' I asked, covering the blood specks on my sleeve. 'The whole story...'

'Well, it's a slow afternoon...why not?'

The old man shuffled closer, cracked his knees as he lowered himself down onto the curb, and, after a long series of black lung coughs, started to narrate.

+

Everything...the whole story [condensed]

+

One night, a few weeks earlier, the poor girl failed to come home. According to neighbourhood rumour, there was a note left on her bed: 'don't worry, Mom. I've gone on a trip with a friend. Won't be gone forever.'

Ain't been heard from since.

Police checked all nearby airports, so they know she hasn't left the country. Apart from that, ain't nothing much they can do except...circulate her photo, wait until someone recognises her...even then, the poor girl might've gone voluntarily.

Who knows?

+

The old man managed to stretch *everything* out to an hour and twenty minutes, making me swat away two more buses [plus annoyed drivers].

Fucking oldies, always snail-like.



Fresno, California, a few weeks earlier...

Sadia lay in bed, Anubis-real, static.

There was light coming in through her window, which meant it was at least twelve.

Rays of bleak normality...

She thought about lifting herself up and reaching to pull down the blind, but there was no point. She already knew what time it was, and that half the day had gone, and trying to hide that fact wasn't going to make it any less true.

Work, activities, do something...

She turned away from the window and faced the rest of her room. There was the medieval corset in the corner. That had to be finished at some point. Then over by the desk there was the sketch she'd started the night before, the one of the Slovenian castle, and...no, that was no good. She didn't want to finish that one. It was a forgery, a lie. She didn't even want to look at it.

Up, you wretch...

Pushing her head into the pillow, she tried to think of reasons why she should bother getting out of bed at all. The corset? The sketch? VR with friends? Mexican Video Caffé owner? None of them were powerful enough. Not even Juana. It was as if she were caught in two different universes and neither one would let her in permanently. Wouldn't let her...just...rest.

There was a knock at the door.

'Sadia...'

A turn of the handle.

'Honey...are you okay?'

The door started to open...

'I'm drawing.'

...then stopped halfway, coupled with a *sorry*.

'It's half past twelve.'

'I know, I'm up.'

There was a pause before the next words.

'Lunch is downstairs when you're ready.'

'Okay.'

'Getting cold.'

'I'll be there soon.'

The door closed and the room reverted to miserable again.

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'If she's really been hexed, which I doubt she has.'

'She has, really.'

'Said who?'

'The Oregon witch, found out last week and hexed her. Said something like-
...fuck, what did she say again? Defences?'

'Not buying it.'

'Ah, that's it. Cos she's normal, or a sceptic...'

'Witchcraft is a scam. Full of militant occultists.'

'...she wouldn't have the-...nah, listen for a sec, let me say it first...'

'Semi-militant. Okay, fine.'

'...cos she was a sceptic, and didn't really believe all this, she wouldn't have the defences to battle it...'

'Defences?'

'...or repel it or whatever. To make it go away.'

'What kind of defences?'

'Don't know. Occult ones.'

'To repel a witch?'

'Yes.'

'A real one, not those goth weirdoes?'

'Yup, real.'

'Like, a one hundred percent real, I can do magic, witch?'

'Yes. For the thirteen hundredth time. A real witch.'

'Seriously?'

'Jesus fucking-..'

The two friends in matching station overalls each took a breath and looked at the alien pharmacy opposite, searching for their next lines. Sadia, sitting on the third chair around the table, stared out the promenade window, at the Byrgius Crater Entertainment Strip.

Not many players outside today, she thought. Yesterday there were at least...how many? Twenty? Now, not even five. Where is everyone? Another server?

'But...wait a minute,' continued one of the friends, stirring a pale green and semi-misted Kontolian tea.

'What?'

'This real witch...'

'Yeah...'

'How do we know she's real? I mean, people can say they're a witch...'

'Don't know, just what I've heard.'

'...right, I know that, but how do we actually know? Like, *know* know?'

Sadia came back from the promenade window [plus the dearth of sentience beyond it] and decided that maybe it wasn't just *Moon Factory 7*, maybe everyone had just got fed up with VR in general and gone off to do something in the real world.

'You in there?'

'Sadia?'

She blinked, auto-responding with 'yeah, thinking,' while her mind played catch-up.

Far as she could tell, they were talking about witches. Real life witches, not the Grand High Witch from the Roald Dahl book or the hag from *No Country For Old Crones*. A stupid subject, really. There were no witches in this world, nor anything supernatural, it was all fiction made by people who couldn't face the truth of things. She despised those people, the fiction makers. They didn't try to deal with anything, they just locked up and hid from it all.

What do you take meds for, *Sadism*?

Ha, even her brother was one of them. Or he was too young to understand. She didn't know which. In truth, she'd never really thought about it. No one had what she had, they couldn't. But maybe her brother would have something similar soon. Maybe he'd get the same problems she had in the next few years. Then he'd stop using that fucking nickname and have some basic empathy for the shit her brain was...for everything she was dealing with. Coping with. Semi-coping. Through sub-standard poetry that no one ever read or liked. Except guys who wanted to fuck her. Pretended they didn't, but...she knew they did. *I really like the imagery in your burning housse poem, Sadia, it's so...*

'You're not saying much...you okay?'

'Hey Sads, wake up! You look half-zombified.'

She glanced up, finger dipped in artificial, lukewarm human coffee. 'Huh?'

'You were just staring into space like an AH-Bot.'

'You okay?'

'*Cansada*. A bit tired.'

'Maybe patch out for a bit, go for a walk outside.'

Sadia nodded, moving her hand to her temple.

'Then come back when you're feeling fresh again.'

'Right.'

'About ten minutes maybe.'

'Hmm.'

'Then we can get started on the graviton emitter arc.'

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In the bath, under an over-saturated pic of Alain Delon owning the beach in *Plein Soleil*, Sadia held her hand an inch above the water and tried to make it rise.

She focused, in a template chamber of her mind, connecting the palm of her hand to the invisible atoms of the surface...and it worked. The water rose up and around the back of her hand. Fresno evaporated and Portland took its place. A guy who'd written the new *Howl* didn't mind that she'd written something better, didn't mind that she was also fingering the owner of a video store caffè. Getting fingered in return. Fucking in front of the projection screen. Warm yellow glow. Endless slopes of snow outside. A castle under construction. The Moon winning constant battles, night after day after night after-...

She blinked.

Her hand was under water, becoming prune-like.

She looked opposite, away from Delon, at the old pics of Fresno her dad had put up.

Before he'd strapped his mouth to the exhaust pipe.

Fresno City College, 1986.

Looked like a futuristic matte shot of a Star Trek city. Strangely uplifting...for a second...until she remembered it was already gone.

Doi-Lock Grape Farm, 1988.

Rows and rows and rows of grape trees.

Gone.

In that guise, anyway.

+++

For most kids, the VR plazas were the main place to hang out in Fresno, but when you got old enough to drink underage, other options emerged.

Like the place Sadia was currently sitting in, *BOA BOA* Grape Park, not too distant from the city centre, but far enough for kids not to be able to walk there.

She rotated the Asahi can in quarter hour turns, watching the guy she'd slept with three times try to provoke one of the AH-Bots into chasing him.

Behind her was the sign for the park, a giant cartoon grape guitar band, with a bubble by their heads that said *GRAPE TIMES AHEAD*.

Pinned up against that was Gita, telling Yemi to go harder, she was getting cold.

'Thief right here...?' shouted the teen provocateur, flicking the AH-Bot's head, '...stealing your fucking produce, motherfucker.'

As usual, the AH-Bot paused, scanned its surroundings, then continued spraying the grape lines.

Billy looked back at Sadia, smirking. 'Maybe if we fuck against his back? What you think, Sads?'

React, AH-Bot.

Activate.

Acid spray his fucking face off.

'Fuck, I was only half-joking,' he added, rubbing the crotch of his jeans.
'But now it's out there...'

Sadia rotated the Asahi can another quarter, then drank.

Behind her, Gita came.

Or pretended to.

Grape times ahead.

+++

Alone in her bedroom again, beyond Anubis, drained.

The medieval corset was still in the corner, inert, and the sketch she'd started a couple of nights earlier was slumped on the desk in front, mocking her. Digging into her brain and forcing her to mock herself. Revenge of the object. Just like Baudrillard said. In the only book of his that could be understood. By her. Unlike Fisher and Bōl, who produced videos, used common words, easy metaphors and allusions.

Fuck.

Do something, wretch.

Act.

She picked up the pencil and went over the outline of the castle. Stopped and looked at the slightly thicker line she'd drawn.

'Real castle or pencil castle...'

The pencil dropped and she studied the castle gate for a full minute. Then a few more minutes. And then a few more. Who invented the pencil, she wondered? And who keeps making them now? She thought of Russian people propped up in front of rows and rows of work benches, sharpening lead, fitting it into wood shavings, and then taking each pencil and throwing it into some kind of pencil bin, and then the bin was picked up and taken across the factory floor and over to the first of a line of trucks waiting outside, and then...

The screen to the side of her flashed once.

She came out of her pencil factory and saw a message icon. It was from one of the author guys, Mark.

Gods, I haven't replied to him for ages, she thought. Haven't replied to any of them.

Maybe I should...

She looked at the subject line on the screen.

But what's the point? He's over there, I'm over here...and it's not like any of them are that interesting anyway.

Hey Sadia face, it's now been a thousand days since I heard from you...actually that might be wrong, maths is not my strong point, haha...but it's true, it's been a while...I'm still reading your stuff and thinking about you though...don't wanna be too gooeey, but I looked at flights to Fresno the other day and seriously thought about booking one...I've got cash, that's no problem, but I don't know if I'd be turning up to a smiley face or a shotgun...like, who are you? Mark who? Oh shit, really...you came all the way here, are you nuts? Yeah, so, I haven't done that...don't worry, I'm not a psycho haha...but it'd be cool to hear from you again. I miss our chats...

btw, weird bit of news...I met Nick Stahl last night...seriously, Nick fucking Stahl...and he stayed at my house [not like that]...I swear I'm not making this up...assuming you know who he is. Thinking about it, he has been out of the loop a while...and is technically pretty old...though you wouldn't know it from his face...looks around 35 tbh...maybe with surgery ha, not sure.

Anyway, write back soon if you want

Mark x

She read it over a couple of times, stopping on the Nick Stahl line.

The washed up filmn star?

From *Post Office* and that shitty *Terminator* filmn?

Probably just a cry for attention.

She understood that.

A noise from the garden outside - probably her brother - made her glance at the window, but the computer screen quickly won her back.

Write back soon if you want...

He seemed like a nice guy, Mark. And she knew she'd written some really desperate stuff to him before...you're so sweet, I miss you, you're the only one who really gets me, that kind of stuff.

But all that...it was only cos she'd been feeling low...it wasn't genuine feeling.

Was it?

She read the message again.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to see him...he was okay to talk to, didn't take himself too seriously, not like some of those other online guys.

He really did seem like a nice person.

Nicer than Billy anyway.

Maybe...

She thought about it a while longer...the danger of strangers, the strangeness of strangers, strangers who could be strange psychos from strange town...then clicked off the message and went back to the pencil.

The anxiety.

Fear.

+++

'Hellraiser?'

Sadia glanced at the cover, vaguely recognizing the pin-headed man, then back at the tall, Yaqui/Mexican woman in her trademark 80's style Slazenger jacket clutching it like it was the Munich Manual.

Juana the video queen.

The one responsible for running her favourite place in all of Fresno, potentially at a loss, as there never seemed to be enough patrons to keep the place going. Only art students and immersion hazers from the VR places opposite. And none of those had much money.

‘Plot...’ continued Juana, flipping to the back of the video case. ‘A sado-masochistic man finds a box that takes him and his penis to the ultimate erotic pain-scape. Eviscerates both of them. With hooks. Incapacitated, he spends the rest of the filmn flaying people in an attic, helped by a woman with no self-esteem.’

‘That’s what it says?’ asked Sadia, faking a frown.

‘Thematically. More or less.’ Juana looked at the front of the old VHS box again and put it back. ‘Though maybe a bit bleak for tonight. Bleak and British. Ah, this one could be better.’

Sadia looked at the new VHS box five inches from her face and read the title. ‘*Veneno para las badas...*’

‘Not bad Spanish.’

‘Is it about fairies?’

‘Visually, not really. It is one of those filmns where things are ambiguous, is it really witchcraft, is it their minds...like this.’

‘Magic-realism...’

‘Maybe it is a bit too slow for your current mood. *No sé*.’ Juana put the case back and bent down, running her finger along the bottom shelf. ‘*Possession*, also realistic...a bit daunting...*Las Amantes del Senor de la Noche*, no, *Videodrome*, no, *Puppet Master 2*, no, *Angel Heart*, no...ah, this one, the ultimate brain-soother.’

She stood back up, took Sadia by the sleeve and rested the new VHS case awkwardly on her palm.

‘*Warlock*.’

‘I’ll go set up the projection screen,’ said Juana, straightening out her black dress [and the purple daggers scattered as kitsch motif].

‘Is it good?’

‘In a schlocky way.’

‘A brain soother...’

‘That’s it. Won’t change your life, but might prompt something...inside thought kind of things.’

Sadia turned to the back of the case and read through the blurb. Out of the corner of her eye, she observed Juana walking over to the back room door, fingernails running along the top of the video shelf, complete comfort/confidence in where she was and what she was doing.

‘I want to work here,’ she blurted out suddenly.

Juana stopped, half turning back.

‘After I graduate...instead of going to college.’

‘What about Portland?’

‘I can go there later...when I’m more comfortable. More stable.’

Juana moved again, continuing on towards the back room door. Reached it. Studied it. Put a hand on the STAFF ONLY sign and seemed to commune with it. Sadia let it play out as if it were an important Yaqui ritual from the tribal lands, standing propped against the Asian horror shelf for almost two full minutes before finally breathing out with a sigh and advancing.

‘You don’t want me to work here?’

‘Portland,’ said Juana, letting go of the sign, turning.

‘What?’

‘Whenever you get that small, mosquito moment of courage, you should go. Do not pin yourself to this place. Here, me. This.’

‘No, I didn’t mean-...I don’t wanna go yet, it was just a-...’

‘Portland. Slovenia. Japan. That little commune in Greenland. Go out and see all of them. Do not think or hesitate. Just go.’

‘But I don’t have-...’

‘I’m serious, Sadia. Illusions will be demeaned...of course...but new things can sprout from that. Beautiful, new things. Much better than this.’

Sadia watched Juana's face, waiting for tears to roll out, or a smile followed by, *just kidding, stay, we'll watch Warlock on loop, naked, legs wrapped around each other*, but it didn't materialize. Instead, for a brief moment, she saw the same thing she'd seen once before, during the screening of *Thirst*...a flash of yellow in her eyes...only this time there were no wandering hands, no massage sticks.

'Think about it at least,' Juana said, pushing open the door. 'During *Warlock*...'

Sadia muttered a perfunctory 'yeah,' leaning back against the acid sci-fi shelf she'd apparently stopped next to at some point. Glanced over at the caffe area. Imagined herself working next to Lexi and the tall annoying guy. Waited for the warm glow to arrive. The yellow of Juana's eyes, the red from something like a futu-

'Coming?'

CHAPTER 33 CHAPTER 35

CHAPTER 34

SON
E FA
BASEMENT
HAUNTOLOGY

The walk back to his quarters was long and curved and involved one elevator pad, just like it did for everyone else on Dah Heen.

Also, like everyone else on Dah Heen, he had a flat-mate.

Helium miner, off-planet.

Far as he knew, she was currently out near Haumea, and, long as she didn't pick a helmet with a crack in it, should be back within a few weeks.

Which meant his quarters was free.

He could kick back and sing out whatever crawled out of his ID, whatever he yanked out by the ankles, shit like,

'motherfucking outrage'

'fuck you on the megaship'

'my grandma and your grandma dancing by the river'

Some others he couldn't think of.

+

Gone to Haumea.

Back in a few weeks.

I stopped reading and stared at the video shelves on the opposite side of the caffè.

Moon Prison stayed in my head for another minute or so - the idea of having a flat on Charon, singing from the swamp of my Id - then switched inevitably to Sadia and her disappearing act.

In some of my scenarios, she was still in Fresno, tucked away in a hostel nearby, potentially sneaking back to this video caffè-store-timehole at some point, while in the more persistent ones, she was out of Cali completely, in a loft conversion, fucking a tanned guy with abs who could write better than me...better than *Lunar Crone* and *Dream Fucker* and *Yellow Muon Blob* and whatever future shit I managed to vomit out the right side of this science-addled brain.

Unless I radically altered my style?

Maybe re-read her stuff and try to emulate some aspects. Or watch some old bizarro filmns like *Holy Mountain* and riff off of that.

Mildly intrigued, I pulled out my phone and searched *bizarro filmns new-old*.

The first on the list was *Eraserhead*, which had already been sucked dry by 90's filmn students, so I moved on and on and on until I found one I'd never heard of.

Begotten.

'Drawn from elements of various creation myths Begotten opens with the suicide of a godlike figure and the births of Mother Earth and the Son of Earth, who set out on a journey of death and rebirth through a barren landscape.'

I read more of the plot and then tried to apply it to the first chapter of *Yellow Muon Blob*, with an imaginary, semi-naked Sadia watching from a nearby seat.

The blob = all the gods.

Main character = angst

Villain = entropy?

It wasn't really working, and the Sadia figure had already sunk down through the floorboards so I took a sip of coffee and went back to *Moon Prison*.

'Is that an old book?'

I looked up, knowing it was the waitress but blinking in surprise anyway.

‘Sorry, didn’t mean to pull you out of it.’

‘It’s okay. Bit of a slow page, actually.’ I closed the book and then opened it again, remembering her initial question. ‘Ah. 2029...not that old.’

‘Really? Cover looks like some of that VHS art over there.’

I glanced over for the three-hundredth time to the shelves, my brain singling out the neon green of *Re-animator*. ‘Think it’s the trend...last thirty years or so. Retro covers. 80’s and 90’s stuff.’

‘Slow reterritorialization of the future...’ she muttered, finally remembering she had my cup of coffee in her hand and putting it down on the table. I watched it land, brain scanning past unii seminars for a rejoinder to the very familiar thing she’d just said. Re-territory something. The thing I could never say right. Linked to the other R word. Deleuze and his...futurism?

‘Rhizome of a rhizome that denies it’s a rhizome,’ I managed after another twenty seconds of internal scan, and probably misquoting.

‘Sorry?’

‘Tomomi Itō...you just said one of her lines. I think.’

‘Ah, you know her?’

‘Reterritorialization of the future, corpse-muon, skim-hauntology...I did a module on it at unii. Her, Derrida, Deleuze, Fisher...Bōl...’

‘Okay, you’re way ahead of me then. I just watched some analysis vids online. Or half-watched cos I’m stuck here most of the time. Yeah, corpse-muon...I think that was one of them.’

‘You watched a full analysis video here? At work?’

‘Sure. Right over there by the counter...under that yellow nightmare. Wah, looks kinda eerie in daylight.’

Like a sponge, I followed her finger and then laughed when I realized she was pointing at *The Running Man* poster. A pretty subtle joke. So subtle I wasn’t sure exactly what the punchline was. *The Running Man* was set in a future imagined in the

80's which was remade again and again and again in the actual future, therefore the actual future was a pastiche of a future that was never tangibly real? Was that it?

Actually, was she even pointing at that specific poster?

I looked up to confirm and saw that she was now staring at the other side of the counter, at her colleague, the tall guy in the orange headband, his tongue playfully licking the rim of a coffee cup. She shook her head then turned back and smiled. 'I'm Lexi, by the way. In case you need to call me over again. And don't wanna shout, *'HEY YOU.'*

'Mark.' I paused, my brain telling me not to add anything. 'In case you need to call me over.'

She laughed, looking at the vacant seat next to me. 'Or I could just sit down now, save time.'

'Err...sure. If you're not busy.'

She did a panoramic of the caffè and then shrugged.

'It's okay, really,' I continued, realizing *if you're not busy* wasn't exactly an ironclad invitation. 'You're a fellow Itō fan.'

'Probably not many of us in Fresno,' she replied, hesitating a second then taking the very edge of the seat. Then shuffling a little and settling for half. 'What's your book about?'

I lifted up the cover and held my finger along the bottom of the title.

'Moon Prison...that's the plot?'

'Actually, I'm not sure. I've only read half of it...but the main guy's out near Pluto now so there's a chance it's metaphorical.'

'Well, you picked a good place to read it.' She gestured at the rest of the booths, which were all vacant except for one hosting a young guy with a giant *✓* tattoo on the back of his neck...who seemed to be doing nothing except slowly stirring his coffee with a straw. 'Plenty of quiet time here.'

I nodded. Drank some of my coffee. Nodded some more.

The waitress, Lexi, was right, it was quiet. Only two customers to deal with. No one fresh coming in off the street. If she wanted she could've been on her phone, absorbing Tomomi Itō vids, but she was here, sitting opposite, looking very much like she wanted me to wait around to the end of shift and take her somewhere.

Or maybe I was imagining things?

Sexual desperation at the loss of Sadia...fumbling around for someone new to latch onto...a bored waitress in a *Tenebrae* t-shirt who was only here cos she didn't want to talk to the sleaze licking the cup behind the counter. Or the potential loon stirring coffee under the *Critters 2* poster.

'I should get back to my spot,' she said, putting *Moon Prison* on the table. 'Let you read in peace.'

'It's okay, you've just sat down. And I wasn't really taking much of it in. Honestly.'

She stayed perched halfway between up and down for a moment...then, acting out a *tough decision* face, reclaimed the seat. *Kuso*, actual interest. To make things worse, she smiled. Right at me. With lips that looked like...

Not Sadia, not Sadia, not Sadia, not Sadia, ran through my head, forcing eyeballs away from her mouth and back to the video shelves.

'This might be a weird question,' I started, the question in barrel only half thought out, 'but did a girl called Sadia ever come here?'

'Err...that's a pretty broad net.'

'She's blonde, around seventeen or eighteen. Said she came here a lot.'

Lexi lost the smile and looked at the man in the other booth, or the *Critters 2* poster on the wall next to him. 'The girl who went missing.'

'Yeah. I just found out about that today...earlier.'

'Well, she did come in here a lot. Mostly at night. But I never really talked to her.'

'Oh.'

'Is she a friend of yours?'

My eyes drifted back to the shelves, scanning the VHS covers for advice. *Wishmaster* seemed to stand out the most this time, which I interpreted as a discreet prod towards raw honesty.

‘Not really a friend, no. We talked online, she told me to come and visit her and...things weren’t so good back home so...’ I paused, trying to gauge the reaction on Lexi’s face. Seemed quite blank; no smile, yet no bitter disgust either. ‘Yeah, sounds pretty pathetic when I say it out loud. Coming all this way for a picture on a computerr. A few back and forth messages. But now that I’m here...and she’s missing...’

‘You want to know that she’s okay?’

‘Yeah. If possible.’

Lexi put her right hand on the table, edging a little towards mine then stopping at the spine of *Moon Prison*. ‘Juana might know something. My boss.’

I instinctively glanced over towards the *STAFF ONLY* door.

‘They watched videos together sometimes, her and the girl, and...I don’t know. I guess they were pretty close. Seemed like it anyway.’

‘Is your boss here now?’

‘Juana? No, no, it’s way too early for her. She usually comes in around half nine.’

‘That’s pretty late. What time do you close?’

‘Eleven.’

‘You mean...she comes in for an hour and a half?’

‘And goes straight to the back room. Usually to watch videos on the projector. If it’s quiet, she’ll get us to watch them too. Which has been happening quite a lot recently, the last few weeks.’

‘Hard working boss.’

Lexi laughed, retracting her hand and standing up. ‘If you really wanna talk to her, come back around ten. She’ll definitely be here by then.’

I nodded and sipped about a millilitre of coffee, bracing myself for more *Moon Prison*. Then unbracing. ‘Is there anything to do around here? To kill an hour or two?’

'Look at your phone.'

This time I laughed. 'Anything else?'

'Near here?'

'Yeah.'

The answer was a nod towards the street. I didn't need to turn to know what she was gesturing at.

'Personally, I'd go with *Nightmare Castle*. It's a few years old, kinda creaky in places, but it lets you explore a lot, like, in a pastiche medieval castle, skim-hauntology style...if you're into that kind of thing?'

'Horror's okay.'

'There are some sleazy types who join now and then...but they usually leave you alone when they know you're not an NPC. Plus, you're not a woman so...'

'I might give it a try.'

Giving one more look at *Moon Prison*, Lexi said, 'see you around ten then,' and headed back to the clown in the orange headband at the counter. I couldn't hear what he said, but it was obvious from the frat grin on his face that it was something sordid.

+++

Like most big VR franchises, the Lux had a must-have-ticket queue stretching out the front door and halfway down the street for both *Quarter-Life* and the *Harem Survival* games, and a *come as you like* deal for almost everything else.

That suited me fine as my sex drive was in deep retrograde...if that was even the right word...and all I wanted was to kill an hour or two wandering vapid-face round a moon base.

Luckily, *Moon Factory 7* still had some free spots on its server so I patched in and went straight to an empty bench over-looking the Byrgius Crater.

And thought of Lexi.

Then Sadia.

Then Syria.

Then Lexi and Sadia, hair down, throwing VHS cases at me.

No no no no no no

The plan.

Focus.

Go back to the video caffè, talk to the night owl boss. If she doesn't know anything, stay at the counter, talk to Lexi. Tell her I didn't try *Nightmare Castle* cos the last time I patched in I ended up fingering Lavinia the Goddess of Death in the sacrifice chamber.

No, don't say that.

Too sleazy.

Tell her I was waiting for her to get off work so we could go over together and patch in. Walk around the castle and look at the paintings. Find a quiet spot and take off that *Tenebrae* t-shirt her boss probably made her wear. Use it as a sweat cloth while we-

No.

Focus, you fucking wretch.

Get out of Fresno, hunt down Nick Stahl. Ask him to utilise his connections and help locate Sadia. Did he have connections? Not really, not anymore. And he tried to strangle that Everton pedant on the plane. Probably not a good guy to be around.

I blinked, realizing there was a youngish Japanese man on the bench next to me.

His face...eyes...seemed familiar somehow.

One of the NPCs?

'So this is where you're hiding,' he said, clamping a very firm hand on my shoulder, keeping it there for several seconds, then using it as leverage to push himself up.

As soon as he was vertical, looming Jupiter-like over the bench, the curtain dropped.

‘Ryu...’ I mumbled, only half aware of my own voice.

‘Keni the little layabout,’ he replied, adding an incongruous smile. ‘Drowning in this wretch industrial mega-scape.’

I reached out towards his hand, praying for flesh, warmth, but it was already moving, drifting away with the rest of my brother’s form down the promenade.

‘You in?’ asked a rough voice from the other side.

I turned, managing a *wab* sound.

‘No more fence sitting. The reactor’s gotta go down tonight.’

‘What?’

‘You’ve got three seconds to lose the goldfish face or I’m gone.’

My brain kicked back in, sending the signal to my vocal chords that would tell the NPC to fuck off.

‘You’re making a big mistake, Ratko,’ he continued, grabbing my sleeve. ‘The powers behind this don’t take kindly to-...’

I swatted the arm away and pushed back, muttering *keso* as the guy’s legs buffered, lost balance, dropped...then another *keso* over faint static background noise when the game re-rendered the thug’s whole body on the promenade floor, stabilizing him as if nothing had happened.

Ah, didn’t matter, he wouldn’t do anything. He couldn’t. The server would be neutering his improv-field, putting him on temporary loop, and then in about two minutes I’d get a warning message, telling me to please use violence sparingly and in scripted scenarios only.

But I didn’t care about any of that, it was a guest server and I was already ten metres away from the holo-thug, running down the promenade, moving past people with only the slightest of shoves, checking the shops and corridors and VR within VR booths I passed, looking for the face of Ryu, the man I was certain was my Japanese brother

but as I ran

and found zero trace of him

at all

I changed tack and started to wonder what I was doing

who I was chasing

why?

My legs pulled up, outside a moon boot insurance depot.

‘Ryu...’ I said, so soft that even the NPCs hovering nearby couldn’t detect it.

‘You died...in the river...’

A red light flashed four times in the top corner of my peripheral vision,
followed by a lush female voice:

‘Warning Player Murk. This server is Category II Rated. To avoid scaring other
players, please use violence sparingly and in scripted scenarios only. Thank you.’

I waited for the closing beeps to echo out then let out a frustrated breath.

Violence...*kusō*.

All I did was push an NPC.

Sparingly.

What was wrong with that?

+++

At twenty-four minutes past ten, I pushed open the door to the weird, noiseless
voidspace of the Last Video Caffé and reflexively checked my phone.

Nope, definitely not eleven.

And there were still cups on the tables.

The door was unlocked.

Someone’s jacket was bunched up on a stool.

Yet...no staff, no customers. No people sounds.

Huh?

I moved over to the counter, peering over the side and hoping to god I
wouldn’t see any dead bodies, or worse, the sleazy guy and Lexi fucking on the floor.

Nope, no one there.

Though the floor could use a clean.

Weird yellow stains and...shapes that looked vaguely satanic, masonic, possibly intentional tile design.

An occult caffè?

Switching to the counter surface, I noticed a cup of half-finished coffee and wrapped my hand around it. Lukewarm, which meant there was at least someone nearby.

Probably in the back room, I thought, walking past the bunched-up jacket stool, heading over to the video section.

But what about the caffè?

I stopped, making a quick detour to the exit and discovering that the sign in the window actually said *CLOSED*.

Kuso, must've been daydreaming when I came in. Though it still didn't make much sense. The door hadn't been locked, anyone could walk in the same way I did.

Maybe the sleazy guy had been in charge of door locking? And his Id was so focused on perving on Lexi that he'd forgotten to take care of it?

I rubbed my head, aware that I was talking myself into a migraine.

Just dial down and check the back room.

See if the boss is there at least.

Obedying my inner guide, I strolled through the video aisles, did pretty well not to be distracted by the gonzo cover art on some of the cases, and made it to the door that said *STAFF ONLY*.

Friends of staff only, I edited, and pushed it open.

Beyond the door was a corridor that could've been teleported in directly from the cheapest VR scenery creator, with generic cream walls, sporadic, framed posters lining both sides and a stack of four boxes at the end.

Symptom of a symptom of a symptom of a symptom of a

Walking slowly forward, I passed some of the posters, most of them in Spanish cursive, and came to a door on the left that promised STORAGE. I didn't really wanna go in but tried the handle anyway.

It was locked.

Good.

I took a breath as if I were halfway up Olympus Mans and examined the rest of the corridor. There weren't any more doors, but I could hear some faint sounds coming from around the corner. Could be Lexi and the boss. Hopefully not the other guy.

My body continued on, dragging the idealist remainder with it.

Brain somewhere between Itō and death haze.

A loon dropping from the ceiling, swinging an axe.

Eyes in the walls.

Corridor as stomach.

Infinite revenge of the object.

Itō straddling a rail gun, shaking her book at me.

Lexi as Damijana Chu, topless.

Eyes closed.

Open.

Template again.

My hand reached out, touching wall.

Stop. Fucking. Wandering.

Boss talk. Focus.

Hand back, the legs moved on.

Find the boss, ask about Sadia. Find the boss, ask about Sadia.

Examine those boxes.

At the end of the corridor, I stopped and examined the boxes. It wasn't much of a mystery what lay within as each one had *MACA* printed in giant black capitals on the side. What was *MACA*? I had no idea and didn't really care.

All I wanted to do was find the hard-working boss and ask about Sadia.

Then go with Lexi to play *Nightmare Castle*.

Maybe.

If she was still keen.

Moving round the corner, things instantly got creepier *and* more promising.

Creepy cos of the flickering bulb at the far end, next to a closed door with the letters *BOSS ONLY*, and promising due to the surplus light glowing surreal patterns against the wall. I wasn't a hundred and one per cent sure, but it seemed to be coming from a room near to the right, possibly a TV stream.

Coupled to the light were the sounds again, human sounds, someone shouting at someone else to put on the glasses.

That voice...sounded very familiar.

Definitely not female, but...

Sticking close to the wall, I edged round the side of the open door and peeked into the room. Ah, it wasn't a TV, it was a giant projection screen, rigged up against the far wall. And sat in front of it, on a four person sofa, were the backs of three heads: Lexi, her sleazy colleague [plus orange headband] and another guy.

No, wait...the V on his neck...it was the lone customer from earlier. The psycho coffee stirrer.

Fuck, he got an invite too?

Him?

I hung back, half-watching the filmn [which I now realized was the Haneke version of *They Live*], half-balling my fist at the thought of either guy putting their shitty arm around Lexi's shoulder.

After two minutes, I decided it wouldn't happen, that they were all just friends.

After four minutes, I realized that each of them looked unusually still.

After seven minutes, I put a hand over my mouth and seriously wondered if they were even alive.

No filmn could be this riveting.

Definitely not Haneke sci-fi.

Or Haneke anything.

Before I could make any kind of move, the sleazy colleague had cropped a hand around his left ear, muttered something inaudible and was now pulling his heavy frame up into a surprisingly rigid standing position. He stood there for a second watching the projection screen. Making nothing but breathing noises. Then, without symbol, sign or yawn, swiveled hard right, towards my position.

Patching in to something akin to caveman instinct, I yanked myself backwards, beyond the entrance to the room, pretty certain I'd been spotted. Or the blur of my hoodie had.

Okay, no problem. Door was unlocked, I was looking for a member of staff, followed the noise down this corridor, sorry.

Nothing weird about being back there.

Was there?

Kuso, footsteps, heavy breathing noises, the weirdo was imminent.

Hurrying back to the box corner of the corridor, I kept half an eyeball concentrated on the projector room, slowing my breaths as the sleazy colleague emerged. For some reason, he had a hold of the other guy's sleeve, pretty rough, as if he were going to kick him out of the caffè.

Yet the V tattoo guy did nothing.

Just let himself be led.

Drunk maybe?

Pills in the coffee?

The two of them continued down to the end of the corridor, ignoring the streaks from the flickering bulb, and pushed open the door that said *BOSS ONLY*. Couldn't see much from my position, but I did catch the sleazy guy's orange headband descending, which meant it was the basement they were sinking into.

Kuso, a basement, I thought, speeding up my lung cycle. Nothing good ever happened in one of those.

But that was just my paranoia. Or immersion haze from the VR.

Basements could be mundane places too.

Wine storage, children's play rooms, yoga zones, rat study.

Didn't have to be anything sinister.

Besides, whatever was going on, I still needed to talk to the boss, and I was pretty sure I could take either one of those guys in a fight...especially if I had the high ground, at the top of the stairs.

Find the boss, ask about Sadia.

Sadia. Sadia. Sadia. Sadia. Lexi. Sadia. Lex-
SADIA.

I left my hiding place and walked as naturally as I could down the corridor. The projection room was tempting, briefly, but, when I passed by, Lexi's head was tilted to the side in a sleeping pose. Better not disturb her, it would look too weird. Just keep going, find the boss.

Hurrying down the rest of the corridor - and flinching at the slowly dying bulb - I poked the door open and took ninja steps down into the basement.

Then stopped, flinching again.

There were noises deeper inside, odd noises, like a cat slurping a bowl of stolen ice cream.

And surprisingly good lighting.

Crouching by the rail - slowly to make sure my knees didn't crack - I squinted through the gaps.

It was hard to make out exactly what I was seeing, but...there was the back of the sleazy guy, his stupid orange headband...and a dark-skinned woman beyond him, seated in the middle of the basement space, beside an incongruously isolated office desk, with both her hands cradling something round...a bowl of some-...

Her head tilted up suddenly, luminous yellow eyes scanning the upper window that opened out onto the floor of an alley. She stared that way for a good twenty

seconds, maybe longer, frozen. Then, apparently satisfied, glided back down to the bowl, and began making the same slurping noises as before.

This was the boss?

Mexican, yeah, probably, but she looked more like a grunge poet from the 70's. Messy hair, jacket with different shades of blue stripe...err...oddly yellow eyes.

More slurping noises, followed by a muffled groan.

I moved down another step, curious what it was she was eating, why the sleazy guy had to stand there and watch her do it, had to be paid OT and-

Something crashed on the floor below.

I looked at my shoe, confused, then back at the banquet scene.

Kuso, fuck...

The Mexican woman had stopped eating and was looking directly at me, blood trickling down from the corners of her lips.

What-...

The sleazy guy had moved and the bowl was now visible...only it wasn't a bowl...not even close to one...it was a-...the thing looked like a cracked-open skull, with a V tattoo branded on bold at the bottom.

No.

Abject. Not real. Abject. Not...

It couldn't be.

Abject real, abject real, abject...

Fuck.

Kuso.

Vomiting would've been the normal response, or retching at the very least, but both were beyond me.

Cos what I was seeing was a cartoon.

Not reality.

That's what my brain kept saying as my eyes watched the Mexican woman mouth words into the sleeve of her jacket, and then a quick half turn to follow the sleazy guy coming up the stairs towards me.

Okay, he's not that strong, high ground advantage, aim for-...a human fucking skull! Cracked wide open and-...

No, not real. Not there. No. Not real. Not real.

The sleazy guy kept coming, like one of Ito's old-new golems, absolutely nothing behind the eyes.

When he was two steps away, I stumbled one back up and held out my left hand, my peace hand, and said, 'it's okay, it's a cartoon, I understand.'

He either didn't recognize the words or didn't care as his claw reached out and tried to grab my hoodie sleeve.

I shrugged off the first attempt, and pushed him away with shouts of *fuck off* the second and third times, but when he came up another step and tried to bite a chunk out of my neck, the darker instinct kicked in. Feigning backswing with my right, I switched fast and jabbed with my left, hitting hard enough to knock him off the step, into the wooden rail and then all the way back down to the basement floor.

'Your fault,' I shouted down, then turned to the Mexican woman and yelled it was her fault too.

It was a lunatic line and it looked like she was about to growl in response, the yellow in her pupils growing so bright they were usurping her actual eyeballs, but then slightly accented words came out instead. '...one of my longest serving staff.'

'What?'

'Almost two years.'

Okay, so she wasn't talking about the human head bowl. Must be the orange headband guy I just put on the floor down there...who now had a pool of blood outlining his skull.

Kuso...that wasn't carpeted?

The cracking noise was actually his-...

Something inside told me to run, get out of there, and my legs were on it immediately, taking another two, three steps back up towards the door before a big vertical cushion came out of nowhere and blocked the way. A cushion that was the spitting image of Lexi...dressed in the same *Tenebrae* t-shirt...holding a bottle of green juice and a tissue pad.

‘Cartoon...dead people...’ I blurted out, putting one hand on her waist to shove her aside while waving the other wildly back towards the basement floor.

Just like her sleazy, not dead colleague, the lights were dimmed.

No facial expression, no blinking.

But she did eke out a faint *no* as her hand moved to touch my forehead, then zagged left at the last millisecond, shoving the wet tissue pad into my mouth.

I pushed her away, coughing, retching, trying to spit out what she’d forced in but it was already

deep green

pungent taste, smell like

dizzy

blurry

Lexi face

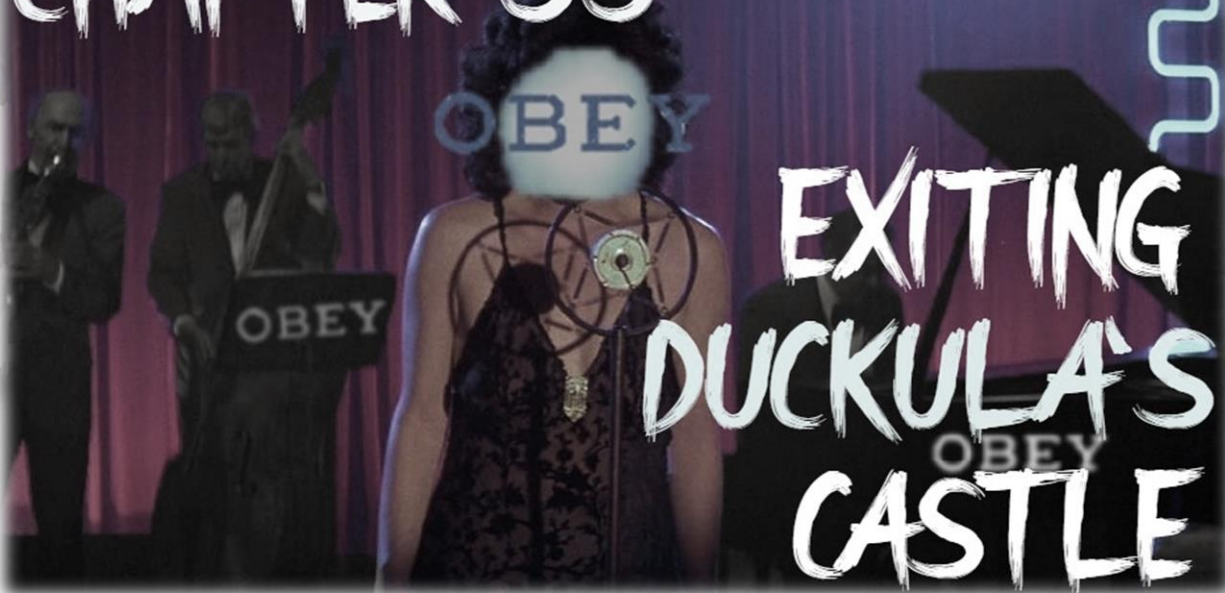
four of her spinning in loose

‘He’s dropping, catch him.’

blue circles

tired and

CHAPTER 35



Jabbing all the buttons but
the lift had already started to ascend and
they were both on it, her hand cult-gripped in his
not love, but definitely fucking.

I pushed past random miners, a depressed radiation mage, industrial insurance
reps, Kontolian peace reps, other reps, a flickering darts promo and leapt up the
spiral stairs three at a time all the way to the upper level and

just as I was about to reach the *bold lift* button
the beast started to descend

Ryu's hand around her arm, the slow creep to the side of her breast, and all I
could do was run back down the stairs again.

He wouldn't, he wouldn't, he wouldn't

slalomed through the neurons of whatever this mesh was inside my skull
but I knew he would

this version of Ryu, he definitely would

and when I jumped the last four steps down to the lift pad, they were gone, on
foot, already two thirds of the way along a corridor, heading to the habitat ring,

heading to bed and
I ran as fast as my boots would go
almost colliding with a tentacle alien and another alien with green skin and
another with a slightly ridged nose and another in robes who looked like an
aristocratic grey lizard riffing on the Waugh meme and

even before I'd reached the corner, I knew it was no good

they were already in bed

on top of the covers

fingers inside each other and

I couldn't bear seeing that right now, not in this scape, so I stopped sprinting
and turned left through a door and slumped down by the wall, with the guy opposite
telling me it was okay, he'd killed the other Keni, stabbed the wretch and buried his
remains in a twelve foot hole by the docks in Kawasaki.

'With a shovel?' I asked, looking up and filtering in the tanned face of Yosh.

Without a single second's pause, I told him to go fuck himself.

'Let's get another coffee, talk about future plans,' he continued, poking the call
button seven times.

'He's with her right now, in bed.'

'The way I see it, with your doppelganger gone...'

'Probably talking about Anarchism...'

'...we can start up the game exchange again.'

'...between fucking.'

'Just call up your brother and tell him to be more consistent with his scheduling.'

'He won't even talk to me.'

'Then we won't have to do anything.'

'Keeps running away.'

'Just sit back and soak up the cash.'

'With my Sadia doll.'

The waitress came over and, after a second of appearing Honduran, morphed into Lexi complete with Mpama-tone skin and *Tenebrae* t-shirt, and told Yosh she wouldn't serve him.

'Cappuccino, and this time without half a cup of foam,' the gangster replied, stretching out his arm and accidentally clipping the head of the kid patched in on the table behind.

'I'm not serving you,' she said again.

'Cappuccino. Light on the foam.'

Lexi turned to my side, eyes on the half-naked Chinese woman across my chest, and asked what I wanted.

'I don't know.'

She tossed over a menu full of cappuccino pics. 'Choose.'

'I can't.'

'This bitch is really pushing it...,' said Yosh, pulling a hunting knife out of his jacket pocket, placing it on the table surface.

'Yosh...I don't think you can do that in here.'

'Implicit, *kasu*, relax.'

He put a hand on my left shoulder and my whole arm spasmed, brain telling me to pick up the knife and stab him in the neck, second brain screaming banshee-like to sit still and continue with the spasms.

There were other choices, too, but they all fizzled out as Lexi leaned over the table, picked up the hot water jug, poured out a glass of *not just hot but boiling* water and then, without any ethics chat with the boss A.I., chucked it in Yosh's face.

Melting wasn't expected, but that's what happened, the kid behind Yosh taking advantage of his ordeal to climb over and start whipping him with the VR cable he'd pulled from under the table.

'Probably gonna do the same to you,' Lexi said, pouring out another glass.

'Wait...'

'If you don't stop me.'

‘No, I can’t melt, it’s-...’

She finished pouring, picked up the glass, took another look at Damijana Chu pouting in her spacesuit, tutted with reverb, and threw the whole thing plus a water park right in my-

+++

‘You okay?’

My hands went up, grabbing at my cheeks...

‘Mark...’

...vocal chords groaning pre-emptively, waiting for the pain, eking out *melting* in lieu of screams...but the pain didn’t come and...with my hands squeezing random parts of my face, I started to hear sounds nearby...voices having a conversation that didn’t seem possible...moving the castle? Finding someone new to induct into the ways of Satan?

Blinking Saizeriya out of existence in six controlled clicks, I opened my eyes to what I instantly recognized was the projection room. In the back area of the video café. Somewhere in Fresno, California. Not Japan. Not *Moon Factory 7*. Fresno.

‘Bad dream?’ asked Lexi, putting a hand on my thigh, forcing a reflex flinch.

‘Give him some space,’ said another voice, vaguely familiar.

I turned right and there was a dagger flash of a Mexican woman eating from a giant human-faced bowl in the basement, which quickly altered into something more stable, the same woman eating a bowl of cereal, half-typing on a computerr, asking if I’d got lost looking for the toilets.

‘Here, drink this,’ the Mexican woman said, pushing a cup into my hand.

I looked left, measuring Lexi’s reaction, and she nodded, saying, ‘go on, it’s an old Mexican remedy for migraines.’

As if magnetized, I reached up and rubbed the back of my head, then my neck, surprised at the lack of moistness.

‘Don’t worry, there’s no serious damage,’ said the Mexican woman.

‘What happened?’

‘You tripped down the stairs, in my office.’

‘I did?’

‘Hit your head on the floor. Luckily, the carpet is quite thick down there.’

Another image cut into my mind...an orange headband circled by a nascent moat of blood.

‘Drink, it’ll make you feel better.’

I rubbed my head again, taking the cup with the other hand and sniffing the surface of the *Re-animator*-green contents. Satisfied it wasn’t toxic ooze, I took a sip.

‘Not bad...’

‘I added some extra spices, a bit of sugar. Do not tell my ancestors this, but the original recipe is quite bitter.’

Swirling the medicine around the cup, I said *thanks* and drank some more. Even in my fuzzy state, I could see out of the corner of my eye that they were both watching me, scrutinising perhaps, so I focused on the projection screen instead. The castle dialogue I’d heard made sense immediately as it was the *Count Duckula* remake from a few years ago. A bizarro, psycho-sexual horror based on an old kids cartoon made to look like it was actually made in the 70’s. From what I could tell, it was about a third of the way through, up to the scene where Duckula tells Agravita he’s only half duck and then warns her never to step foot in the dungeons.

‘That’s it...drink it all down,’ said the Mexican woman, long fingernails stroking the sleeve of her jacket. One of those retro 70’s ones that poets used to wear to look more *favela*.

‘Are you the boss?’ I asked, surviving another sip.

‘Of this place? *Si*. My name is Juana.’

‘Ah...I was coming to see you.’

‘I know. Lexi told me.’

‘After ten. That’s when she said to come, and...I came in...I remember that part, but...after that it just...everything feels kind of blurry. Motives, plan. *Kuso*. Why was I coming here again?’

‘Finish the drink first. Watch the filmn.’

She guided the cup back up to my lips and, cos it did actually taste pretty good, I only half resisted, lifting up a sheepish arm and then allowing her to lower it back onto my knee.

On the other side of the sofa, Lexi still had her hand on my thigh, but wasn’t saying very much. In fact, when I turned to ask if she’d seen the filmn before, I thought for a second that I was looking at a mannequin. Pam Grier reformed in plastic, re-cropped with much smaller hair.

Then she blinked, moved her arm, and the thought dissipated.

But still...she wasn’t saying much.

Was the filmn that absorbing?

Following the wind-heavy soundtrack back to the screen, I watched while rubbing my head and finishing off the rest of the drink. The main character, Agravita, couldn’t sleep and was wandering the castle. Poor naïf didn’t realise it, but the tiles she was gliding over had satanic iconography painted on, an easy thing to miss as the candles and wall decoration were beautiful, ethereal, and the other woman in the castle, Vulianko, was opening the forbidden door to the dungeons wearing nothing but a thin, transparent gown, the same one she would be murdered in later, but not really murdered, and down Agravita went, as I would’ve too, entranced, chasing the trail of Vulianko into a well-lit office corridor, with tidy, little work cubicles set up in each cell she passed.

‘Such a great twist...’ I muttered, still grinding the top of my head.

There was no response back, so I turned left and saw that Lexi was asleep on the back cushion, her head tilted towards me, lips barely an inch from my shoulder.

‘How do you like Fresno so far?’ asked Juana, from the other side.

I shifted to face her, opening my mouth to say *honestly, it's better than I expected, even though Sadia's not here*, then stopping when I realized how long that sentence was and how much effort it would take to get it out and how comfortable this new shroud of wispy, colourless fog was and-

'Could you imagine staying here for a while?'

'Can't...' I answered, a bit groggy. 'Have to go.'

'Where?'

'Not sure.'

'Then you can stay a while.'

'No...have to go.'

'Why?'

I hesitated, confused by the yellow glint in Juana's eyes, but it was only momentary as she put her hand softly on my forearm and repeated her question in the most soothing voice I'd ever heard. Like a Kontolian silk pillow in soundwave form.

'Need to find Sadia,' I replied, closing my eyes.

'You know her?'

'No. Not really.'

'You've talked to her?'

'No.'

'Messaged her?'

'Yes. Online. A lot.'

'Recently?'

'Before.'

There was a long silence, with gaps in the fog that prompted a Bōlian refresh of the room. Yes, a room. Things pleasant and similar. Projector blanket. Lexi asleep. The viewing couch. Juana my guide. Kind of. Her hand still on my arm, but yellow eyes lost in the filmn. I looked over, recognizing the scene. Duckula in one of the few dungeons that actually matched the signifier, torturing the Israeli guy who'd come to

the castle with Agravita. Dagger in one hand, prisoner's semi-erect dick in the other, the Count stared trance-like at the three red lights lined up vertically in the alcove opposite.

'Did you do something to her?' asked Juana, pulling me back to the sofa, the grip of her hand tighter than before.

'What?'

'Sadia. Did you do something to her?'

'Do something. No.'

'Do you know where she went?'

'No.'

'But you do like her?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

I hesitated again, this time genuinely stuck. *Her writing is good. She responds to what I say. Seems depressed about where she is and I'm outside of that.* But none of it was really accurate. They were just constructions. Better to say the truth. Juana wouldn't judge. It wasn't in her nature. Somehow I was certain of that.

'She's really pretty,' I answered, looking at Agravita waltz down the castle stairs, blonde hair flowing wild past slight Gaelic shoulders.

'Do you like her poems?'

'Not really.'

Juana took her hand off my arm and, although there wasn't enough light to be sure, it looked for a brief second like she was smiling.

'More drink,' she said, leaning down over the arm of the sofa and coming back with a refilled cup of neon green stuff.

I didn't have the energy or the will to say no...in fact, I wanted more as it was quite tasty...so I took it from her and drank half of it in one go. Then leaned back into the sofa and concentrated on the filmn again.

Ah, good timing. Agravita was in the bath, with Vulianko and her dagger opposite, and Duckula watching from a peep hole in the wall. I'm coming closer towards you, said Agravita, breasts partially cloaked by hanging blonde curls. Don't you dare, replied Vulianko, nipples distorted just below the surface. If I hadn't been so exhausted, so absorbed in the fog, I would've got hard, but as it was, I just sat there and appreciated the set design, the actress placement. Blocking as someone Japanese used to call it.

'What about Lexi?' asked Juana, as Agravita reached an arm forward. 'Do you like her?'

'Yes.'

'Sexually?'

I tilted left, looking at the woman who'd quoted Tomomi Itō - a theorist I'd only half read - the low-hanging collar of her *Tenebrae* t-shirt, the tattoo text on her forearm that I hadn't noticed earlier. *This is no church*. Her napping position, the vague squint on her face...her hand still on my thigh.

'Yes,' I answered, finally.

'Why?'

'I don't know.'

'Think.'

'She quoted someone I know,' I said, sliding down into the couch, giving the keys over completely to my subconscious.

'Anything else?'

'Has the same name as Lexi Alexander.'

'Who?'

'Palestinian-American film-maker. Martial artist.'

'Anything else?'

'Pretty. Slim. Big tits.'

There was another pause in the questioning, so I looked at the projection screen again, hoping to see the Agravita and Duckula sex scene. Nope. It was way beyond

that. Somehow they'd got to the end of the film already. Agravita in the snow outside the castle, pursued by the purple drone bee trying to mesmerise her back to the Count.

'Do you like Lexi enough to stay here?'

'Yes,' I answered, eyes still on the screen.

'In the video caffè?'

'Yes.'

'As a worker?'

'Yes.'

'Good. Very good.'

Taking the cup out of my hand, Juana slipped into the folds of the fog for a few seconds, then came back and gently guided my head away from the screen.

'Stay fixed on my eyes,' she said, pupils a blurred yellow.

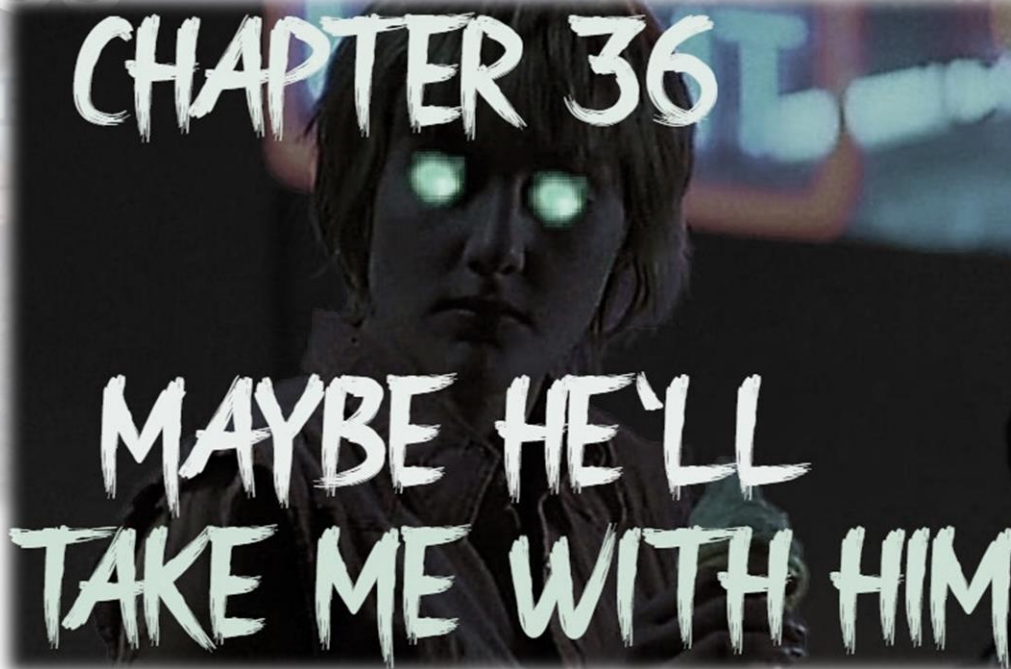
'Okay...'

'No wavering. Pure focus on me. This face.'

I did as she said, keeping my whole head steady as she placed fingernails against my temple, and then...without preamble...began slowly, methodically pushing them in.

There was no pain, just the soft, insistent tone of her voice.

'You've been working here for three days. Fresno seems like a cool place. Sadia's gone to Portland, she's fine. You should talk to Lexi more. You've been working here for three days. Fresno seems like a cool place. Sadia's gone to Portland, she's fine. You should talk to Lexi more. You've been working here for three days. Fresno seems like a...'



CHAPTER 36

MAYBE HE'LL TAKE ME WITH HIM

Elise at a Mexican restaurant in Budapest.

Jame and Tariq next to the impossibly blue Lake Pukaki.

Ah To pretending to understand what the Indonesian fortune teller is saying.

Her, on a *Pluto Ya* duvet, in fucking Fresno.

Throwing her phone [and friends' pics] towards the end of the bed, Lexi got up and stood like a powered-down cyborg in the middle of the room.

Twenty past eight.

In an hour, she'd be standing in pretty much the same state in the video caffè, waiting for the next customer to wander in and order blueberry pie...all the curious parts of her brain switched off.

No, that wasn't right.

She still had her phone. And Mark. If he wasn't too hungover from the *welcome to the churn* drinks Juana had forced on them the night before.

When did they leave again?

Half two?

Ah, didn't matter. She wasn't feeling that rough so he wouldn't either.

Changing her *Relaxed Bear* shirt for one of the five *Tenebrae* work tops, she went out into the living room and immediately collided with Eisen's attempt at *I'm planning to go to the supermarket* in Japanese.

A flat mate who didn't do language exchanges as soon as he woke up, she thought, as she swiped her Tenant Card in the kitchen slot, turned on the kettle and grabbed two slices of bread from the basket. That would be nice. One who could already speak another language...who wasn't from Fresno...who'd travelled to other places around the world...and for some reason had decided to stop dead still and work in the same tedious...relatively tedious...video caffè as her. A Japanese-looking guy called Mark, who appeared constipated whenever she asked if he was Japanese.

The kettle boiled, making a rattling sound that sounded like the washing machine.

Yeah, the whole thing was quite strange.

But he did say he wasn't staying forever...in *No Agro Lounge*, about eight hours earlier, with her hand parked on his knee. Gods, that was pretty overt. But appreciated too cos he never tried to push it off. In fact, far as she remembered, they'd sat next to each other all night.

Wah...maybe when he left again, he'd take her with him.

If she let him know that was an option.

Anywhere in the world, por favor.

Except LA.

And Poland.

'I don't know because it is difficult to know,' filtered through in broken Japanese, snapping off the daydream and re-spawning her slumped like a depressed koala on the couch, right hand almost dropping a piece of toast.

When did that happen?

The kettle boiling, that was okay, but the toast...

More background Japanese, this time with an English translation.

Followed by a *so desu ne?*

Lexi glanced over at Eisen, her eternal flat mate, patched in with some pale guy in Japan. Six months and he was still nowhere near her level. And her level wasn't even that high. Barely even low-intermediate, if she were being honest.

A noise from the flat below, a woman shouting at someone to stop buying so much bread.

She leaned back into the couch, eating up to the crust of her toast, closing her eyes when Eisen started speaking louder Japanese.

I'm too harsh, she thought. At least he's trying. Least he has a plan to get out of here. Even if it is slightly dumb. Jammer, too. Gone to NASCAR, what the fuck? But at least he actually did something...has energy of some kind.

What do I have?

Nightmare Castle?

Work?

Cold shivers every time I hear the word Redondo?

Sensing a cascade of negative realism banging on the neural gate, she got up, dumped the leftover crusts in the bin and went back into her room.

On the shelf by the bed were stacks of second-hand textbooks – Portuguese, Cantonese, Slovenian, Japanese, Urdu – and next to those were children's books in the same languages, stolen from the local library before it'd got shanked by *Audio Village*.

She picked one up – *Kill The Mouse* in Portuguese – and flicked through.

Something something cheese in the fridge.

If the mouse didn't something the something, the cheese would go bad.

Grabbing her phone from the bed, she clicked on the Portuguese-English dictionary app and started translating the mystery words. At the same time, in her head, she walked around the main hall of *Nightmare Castle*, telling Mark about the history of the torture devices in fluent Japanese.

From the living room, Eisen's Japanese voice continued, dragging her back.

‘Okay *desu*,’ she said softly, putting the phone in her pocket.

+++

Outside the *caff *, she was greeted by an almost identical replica of the scene from the day before.

Mark staring through the main window, looking slightly confused.

‘Yes, this is where you work,’ she said, nudging him aside a little and swiping the lock on the door.

He turned, eyes glancing at the *Tenebrae* t-shirt, then at her face.

‘Feeling rough?’

‘A bit.’

‘Wanna walk around for a few minutes first, get some more air?’

‘No need.’

‘Don’t have to buy anything.’

‘I’m fine. Lots of energy.’

‘Good, then you can start adding the cream paste to the pies. I’ll turn on the coffee machine.’

‘Coffee...’

‘After that we can sit and stare at our phones.’

+++

An hour later, Mark had shrugged off what was either a hangover or the longest ever duration of immersion haze, and was now leaning off the edge of a stool on the customer side of the counter, asking Lexi direct what Jammer was doing in a lunatic place like NASCAR.

‘Driving? Chasing the cheerleaders?’

‘He still hasn’t messaged you?’

‘Nope.’

‘That’s weird.’

‘It’s only been a few days. Besides, he’ll probably come back after a week or so...when he realizes how hard it is. And that he has to pay all the insurance costs out of his own pocket.’

Mark nodded, looking over at the only booth in the caffè that was currently occupied. Unlike most of the customer base, this one had two teen girls taking pics of the *Scanners* poster looming above their table.

‘Don’t know if Juana will rehire him though,’ added Lexi, watching Mark’s fingers flick at each other. ‘He did leave without giving notice, and...I guess if he says sorry enough, maybe it’ll work...but I doubt it. Are you okay?’

‘Headache,’ Mark replied, fingers now digging into his temples.

‘Probably from last night.’

‘Yeah.’

‘I think Jammer left some Panadol in the back room, if you need it?’

He looked over at the *STAFF ONLY* door and stopped digging.

‘Open offer.’

+++

The rest of the day passed sloth-like.

Mark killed time the same way Lexi did when she’d first started working there, walking around the video shelves, reading the blurbs on the back of the cases, while she stayed behind the counter and paddled through a Portuguese entertainment site.

When Portuguese got too much, she switched to Cantonese, and when she struggled to read even a sentence of that, she loaded up one of the Japanese review channels.

Unlike Eisen, she didn't shadow any of the dialogue, mainly cos it was annoying as fuck and would drive the few customers they had away, but she did try and mouth some of the harder words.

'Do you understand what they're saying?' asked Mark, pouring out another coffee for both of them.

'About fifty per cent.'

'That's impressive.'

'Most of it in fragments.'

'You want me test you?'

'Yeah, please don't.'

He slid the coffee cup across the counter, keeping his hand on the side just in case, and looked out the window at the VR plaza opposite.

'Not much of a queue today.'

'Wait till seven, it'll be packed.'

He nodded, turning back to the counter and listening to the Japanese woman talk about the dearth of original programming on *Hey Muon*.

'She's not wrong,' he said, half to himself.

'I got the part about *Hey Muon*...' Lexi replied, still scanning the subtitles. 'And original something.'

'Not bad.'

'Hopefully better than my flat mate,' she muttered.

'What's that?'

Before Lexi could lay the foundation stone on what she knew would turn into a Chinese tower of a rant, the door opened and Juana walked in. Oddly [for her], she was wearing a yukata-like robe instead of the usual Slazenger jacket, and had another, quite pretty Mexican woman on her arm.

'Busy night?' she asked, looking around at the empty booths.

'Jam packed.'

‘Well, let me play the part of the Iraq genie and, ta da, give you the rest of the night off.’

‘Seriously?’

‘Go get lost in some VR. Play that *Nightmare Dungeon* game you always talk about. Have some genuine fun.’

‘But...’

‘Don’t worry, you’ll still get paid. Now go.’

‘Yes, boss.’

Lexi grabbed her jacket from the stool, and Mark’s jacket beneath it, then dragged him by the arm to the door as he didn’t look like he was going to be able to get there himself.

‘Did you see her eyes?’ he asked, as they stepped out onto the pavement.

‘Yeah, they’re always like that.’

‘What, glowing yellow?’

‘It’s a birth defect, she said her whole family has it. Come on, let’s get over there before her friend does something annoying and she changes her mind.’

+++

Globs of melted wax on the candle-holders.

Spider webs without spiders.

Paintings of pseudo-historical psychopaths tired of hiding the fact.

The lack of any other living people, apart from the grubby-looking NPCs chained up in the cells.

‘If you want to, you can start as one of those guys,’ said Lexi, hand on Mark’s arm as she led him down the corridor of the castle’s main dungeon.

‘And try to escape?’

‘That’s one option.’

‘What’s the other?’

‘It’s pretty hard though. The guards that come in are quite intimidating, and they don’t do stupid, reckless things like they do in the filmns. Or other VR.’

‘Like leave the keys dangling from their belt as they bend down?’

‘Yeah, nothing that dumb. Thank the pagan gods.’

Mark stopped by one of the candles, putting a finger up to touch the melted pile of wax hanging off the edge.

‘Feels real, right?’

‘Very.’

‘That’s what I like about it. You can tell the designers really loved this type of filmn. All the little details, like-...’

Lexi’s attempted monologue was broken by grunt-sounds of someone fucking in the next cell along.

‘Yeah, that’s on the marketing team,’ she said, deadpan.

‘The promo pic was quite sleazy,’ said Mark, not moving from beside the candle.

‘Doesn’t matter, there should be a fizz-screen up...if the door’s not closed.’

‘Category II limits...’

‘Though I’m not sure what’s happened to the soundproofing. It usually blocks cell noise...torture, sex...’

‘Audio must be glitching.’

‘Yeah, I suppose. The Lux is pretty old.’

‘Really? Doesn’t look it.’

‘About six years. Maybe seven. Can’t remember exactly. Wah, fucking hell...let’s just get past the sex noise first, before the guy peaks.’

Lexi gripped Mark’s arm tight and led him quickly past the open cell, gesturing at the hazy screen stopping them from seeing the pervert either fucking or playing the prisoner. ‘Black door over here leads down to the main torture chamber. Hopefully, no one’s in there.’

‘Dunno. I’m half expecting a maze of blurry screens...’

Lexi laughed. ‘More like some depressive strapped to the rack.’

‘Fantastic.’

‘It’s okay, you can just ignore them.’

‘Harmless pervs?’

‘Pretty much.’

+++

Luckily, they were both wrong.

The main torture chamber was vacant.

Apart from the collection of interrogation equipment with animal bloodstains on it and a vending machine costumed as a medieval cabinet that served players pseudo-goblets of wine [for a small in-game fee].

‘Nice rack,’ said Mark, as Lexi mimicked the action of strapping herself to the slab in the middle of the chamber.

‘I knew you were gonna say that.’

‘Sorry.’

‘Usually people call Lavinia the Goddess of Death and ask her to whip them. Or do other stuff. Actually, if you know the right approach, the right dialogue, you can even end up seducing her.’

‘Sounds realistic,’ muttered Mark, looking at his fingers and then, in a kind of weird reflex, tucking them away in his hoodie pockets.

‘I think the exact words are in a manual somewhere upstairs. Pay-to-open, of course.’

‘Adventurists...’

‘Yeah, it’s kinda annoying, but...that’s California.’

‘*Kuso*. I’ll probably be out of cash by next week, staying here. It’s insane.’

Lexi patted him on the back in mock sympathy, mock apology, mock something. ‘Hey, you wanna call her? Give it a try?’

‘What, now?’

‘We’ll do a dual approach. Both of us lie down on the slab, then take it in turns to attract her.’

‘Good tribute, bad tribute...’

‘Here, I’ll squeeze up a bit, let you climb on.’

Mark put a hand on the edge of the rack and watched as Lexi shuffled over to the other side. It wasn’t the roomiest of torture slabs, but it would probably do.

Rolling on, he tried first to lie flat on his back, but his shoulders were too broad, so he turned on his left side and...got stuck. His hand had nowhere to go but across Lexi.

‘I should get off...’ he said, but the movement attached to it wasn’t fast enough as Lexi grabbed his wrist and put it over her stomach.

‘This is okay,’ she said, turning her face slightly towards him.

‘It is?’

‘For a little while.’

‘Not too cramped?’ he asked, looking at the iron maiden in the corner, then the door leading down further to the pendulum cave, then slowly pivoting back to Lexi.

‘Nope.’

‘We’re pretty tight.’

‘I’d call it snug,’ she said, pushing her lips forward and stopping just short of his...hovering for a second to see if he’d do anything...then pushing on when a flash of him already inside her pulsed through the Russ Meyer chunk of her brain.

Mark may have conjured up the very same image, or an even more erotic one, as his lips pushed back, right hand moving up her body, mouth finding a gap to ask if they were really doing this, if the rack was stable enough, and her mumbling back that they weren’t really doing anything, just having fun like Juana told them too.

She repeated the line when her fingernails moved down onto his thigh, and his hands tried to roll her *Tenebrae* t-shirt up over her breasts.

‘I can’t stop...’ he said, giving up on the t-shirt and kissing her neck.

‘Don’t have to.’

‘But...the rack...here...’

‘It’s okay, just VR. No consequences.’

‘What about later?’

‘Later where?’

‘I don’t know, I thought-...’

‘My place?’

Lexi moved her hand back up to his stomach, then off him completely when he still didn’t answer.

‘You okay?’ she asked, pulling her t-shirt back down.

It was a good question.

Mark was halfway off the rack, staring at the stone steps leading back up to the dungeon corridor. His hand was half-raised, as if he were attempting to point at something, but some ethereal force was preventing him from doing so.

‘Ryu...’ he whispered, so low it was barely audible.

‘Real?’

Mark turned back to her, waking up a little. ‘Japanese guy...on the stairs...did you see?’

‘No.’

‘Just now...he was right there, watching us.’

‘Great, another pervert.’

‘Then...gone, suddenly.’

‘Probably followed us down from the main hall. Good, he’s gone, you scared him off. How about we lie down again?’

Mark pushed himself fully off the rack and headed over to the stairs, almost tripping on the uniformly flat stones.

‘Where are you going?’

‘I have to find him, see what he wants...’

‘The Japanese guy? Now?’

‘...see if it’s really him. I’ll be back in two minutes.’

‘But...’

‘Two minutes, I swear.’

‘Mark...’

Lexi lined up a few quick, cutting things to respond with, but finally just slumped back down on the rack and looked up at the cracks in the fake stone ceiling.

Was that just a very convoluted *no* to dungeon sex?

She pulled back the brief scene, the kissing and groping and redundant dialogue, trying to make sense of it all.

It’s VR.

No real consequences.

In *Nightmare Castle*, things like this happened all the time.

Cos it was fake.

But they weren’t.

They *had* kissed, they *had* touched each other.

And she was the one who’d initiated it.

Which meant...what?

He wasn’t interested?

The rack was too macabre?

Dungeon setting too bleak?

She rolled onto her side, looking at the dagger of light on the staircase wall.

Or maybe he really did see another Japanese guy.

A friend of his.

And that’s why his dick was hard.



‘Nas ultimas duas semanas, eu tenbo lido sobre Carl Jung e sua teoria do inconsciente...’

Lexi followed the line with the tip of her pen, eyes narrowed, the rest of the video caffè a *Man Ray* haze.

‘In the last two weeks,’ she said quietly, ‘I have...*lido*...seen about Carl Jung and his theory of the incon-...unconscious.’

Putting pen to lips, she revised her translation.

Lido...lee-do...

Was that *seen* or *read*? Logically, it had to be one of them...you wouldn’t do anything else to a theory of someone except read or see it...or trash it...would you?

‘I think that guy wants a coffee,’ said Mark, from the other end of the counter.

‘What?’

‘You want me to serve him?’

Lexi put the pen down and looked over at the only booth with a live, human shape. *Foda*. One of the art students, a regular in a green beanie that was seemingly glued to his head.

‘I’ll do it.’

She picked up the pad [and pen again], and went over. As usual, the guy ordered a caramel latte with zero sugar and then coughed, *muito* artificial, before asking if she'd ever tried the VR plaza across the road.

'Once or twice.'

'They have *Pluto 2280* now...probably gonna give it a shot later, if you wanna co-op?'

'Is that the sci-fi game?'

'Yeah, sequel to *Pluto 2270*. *Muito légal*, *muito* hype. Heard they've jazzed it up a bit too...more missions, more crisis events. Huge-ass servers.'

Lexi flinched at the Portuguese then glanced over at Mark, who looked, for a brief moment, like a rabbit in a fox-run pool hall, before blinking himself out and scurrying back to his phone.

Okay, so he's still looking, she thought, turning back to the customer. Even if he's barely said a word to me all morning.

'Sorry, I'm not really a big sci-fi person,' she replied, adding the same sympathetic smile she used on the elderly.

'Yeah, me neither. Just the newness factor mostly.' He nodded to himself and looked left, at one of the *GRAPE FEST* stickers Juana had stamped on the table.

'How about this grape thing? Any interest?'

'Only if I'm cultivating a migraine...'

He tilted his head, eyes squinting at her neck as if that had the answer.

'I mean, I'm not good with large crowds.'

'Oh.'

Lexi tapped the pad with her pen and said, 'caramel latte, coming up,' then made her way back to her side of the counter. Surprisingly, Mark was there, sitting on the stool next to hers, going over her Portuguese notes.

'Think I can actually read some of this...'

She put the pad down and took her seat, pulling the notebook an inch closer.

'It is Portuguese, right?'

‘*Sim.*’

‘I thought you were studying Japanese.’

She looked at him, at the lips she’d kissed the night before, at the eyes couched in *didn’t sleep until three* fatigue. ‘Good to see you’ve rebooted.’

He laughed, looking down at the counter. ‘Yeah, I’ve been a bit low-key. Sorry about that. I didn’t know if you were...if I’d fucked things up last night.’

‘By running off and leaving me alone in a torture chamber for an hour?’

‘VR torture chamber...’ he countered, but not with any real conviction.

Lexi switched to her Portuguese notes, running through the reply bubbles in her head and pricking each one. Not that he didn’t deserve a bit of fire, but...what was the point? They still had to work together.

‘If Juana says it okay...maybe we could try again tonight?’

She looked up, eyes in sync with the *Red Sonja* poster above the waffle display boxes.

‘The VR part...not the other stuff.’ He paused, glancing at her arm, perhaps subtly trying to nudge over to her *Tenebrae* t-shirt. ‘Unless you want to...’

‘That’s a big if.’

‘With Juana?’

‘She’s more likely to make us watch a filmn in the back room than let us go early again. Very likely, in fact. Assuming she’s still following the trend of the last few weeks.’

He nodded, shifting back to her notes, squinting at some of the words. Probably the ones that couldn’t be guessed in English.

‘But we both have a day off tomorrow. If you really want to redeem yourself, you can take me somewhere.’

His eyes shifted, scanning the window opposite.

‘Not your hostel room.’

‘Wah...no chance, there’s seven other people in there. And the common room’s got one of those old NEO-GEOs...weirdly popular.’

‘Good. Then somewhere else.’

Lexi turned back to her notes, read through the last line one more time then closed the notebook and put it under the counter. As an instant substitute, she pulled out another notebook, loaded up one of the Slovenian vlogs she’d found and put in the earphones.

‘Is that Croatian?’ Mark asked, peering over.

‘Slovene.’

‘You’re studying that too?’

‘Japanese, Portuguese, Slovene, Cantonese, Romanian and Urdu. Three on alternate days.’

‘Wah...’

‘Making up for wasted time.’

‘Yeah. In a big way.’

‘You better get started on that caramel latte,’ she said, gesturing at the green beanie guy in the booth, who was glaring back at them, jagged fingernail scraping off the *GRAPE FEST* sticker on the table.

+++

Lexi was right about Juana.

Coming in alone around half nine, she told them with a flicker of yellow in one eye that, as it was a day off the next day, they should all go to the back room and watch *Re-animator*.

Mark seemed to be aware of the name, while Lexi muttered, ‘*foda*, again,’ under her breath, quickly followed by, ‘good choice,’ when Juana glared at her.

Doesn’t matter really, she told herself, as they all took their places on the sofa, three glasses of purple shit allegedly honoring *GRAPE FEST* in their hands. It’s a short movie, and as long as she doesn’t have any of the sequels lined up for afterwards...

‘By the way,’ Juana said, pausing the filmn two minutes in and turning left, lips stopping dangerously close to Mark’s cheek. ‘There’s a sofa bed in the other back room, you can sleep there starting from tomorrow night.’

‘Me?’

‘It’s not healthy to stay in a hostel too long. Not to mention being a drain on your finances.’

‘Err...okay, thanks,’ he said, sipping on the purple wine. ‘I’ll think about it.’

Juana grunted, pressed play and lasted thirty-three seconds before pausing again. ‘In case I wasn’t clear, I’m offering it to you for free. You should accept.’

Mark glanced left at Lexi, who gave a distorted nod from behind her wine glass.

‘It’s agreed then,’ Juana continued, pushing a bunch of jumbled hair out from the side of her neck, ‘you can move your stuff tomorrow, after whatever you have planned during the day.’

‘Okay, err...thanks. Again.’

She patted him on the head, twice, then moved down to the shoulder and kept her hand there for at least a minute as the filmn resumed playing.

Spotting the move, Lexi shifted towards the middle of the couch, leaning her head into Mark’s other shoulder.

Get your fucking paw off my Japanese lifeboat raced a few times round her head but was diluted by the weird basement experiment taking place on the projector screen...which stopped abruptly, again, just as the syringe with green shit was about to go in.

‘I almost forgot,’ said Juana, removing her hand and retreating to the far side of the couch. ‘Sadia sent me an e-mail today.’

‘She did?’ asked Mark, sitting up and inadvertently dislodging Lexi from his shoulder.

‘Quite a sweet one. Said she’s doing well in Portland.’

‘That’s where she is?’

‘Apparently.’

‘Does her family know?’ asked Lexi, peeking out from the other side of Mark’s face.

‘I suppose they do.’

‘And the police?’

Juana held up the remote and pressed play. ‘Questions, questions...that I cannot answer. Let’s focus on the filmn, shall we?’

+++

The next morning, Lexi woke up with a slight migraine.

Probably the purple wine, she told herself, as she checked her phone and saw a message that instantly made her migraine worse.

‘Guy at the hostel said best farm for *GRAPE FEST* is *Livid Crop*. Free samples long as you can stand. What do you think?’

Her first reaction was *Fuck off*.

Her second was *sorry, I have no interest in exploring the sights and smells of a city I’ve lived in my whole life*.

Third was *no way, too crowded*.

Fourth was *what if my exes are there?*

And the one she finally went with: *okay, what time?*

+++

With one Panadol already taken, and eight more in her bag, Lexi headed out in her flat-mate’s car, phone playing a Romanian travel vlog that she could barely understand, the streets outside dotted with Fresnoans in purple t-shirts and one poor fucker decked out in a full grape costume.

As it wasn’t a work day, she’d opted for the *KUNG FOOD FIGHTING* t-shirt she’d picked up in LA, the one good thing left from that whole six month debacle. In

which she'd spent the majority of her time inside her shitty flat, hiding from all those whiny-...

Nope...no.

That way lay bad psychology.

Id regression.

Focus on *GRAPE FEST*. And the crowds...of people you really don't want to see.

Foda.

Okay, focus on the free wine.

And Mark.

Let them be the anchors.

+++

According to the leaflet given to them by *Livid Crop* staff, and the e-version that popped up on their phone 0.000023 seconds after they'd bought their tickets at the front gate, all the wine stalls were free as long as one of your group was a tourist.

Thanks to Mark's alien status, that meant them but, after trying a glass from the first four stalls next to the entrance, Lexi almost wished it didn't.

'Let's check out the tapas,' she said, feeling her head sway a little.

'You okay?'

'I took a Panadol earlier. Could be a bad mix.'

'Just tapas then.'

'Yup.'

Wandering past Spanish signs and Mexican faces and a drunken slur from a pink-faced local, Lexi told Mark she'd feel better soon and would hopefully be okay to start back up on the wine in an hour or so.

'That's odd,' he said, looking past her.

She turned, not bothering with the performance of confusion at what exactly was odd, and read the poster on the front of the Galician ham stall that said:

MISSING: Sadia Melville.

'I thought Juana said she was in Portland,' continued Mark, looking around the nearby stalls as if the Mexican VHS obsessive was lurking there somewhere.

'They probably put them up days ago, then forgot to take them down.'

'You think?'

'I don't know. That's what aligns with Juana's version.'

'Suppose so.'

Lexi picked up a cocktail stick with a surprisingly generous slice of ham stuck on the end and looked left. And buffered.

Fuck, that guy...he still came?

Even after her soft rejection?

Smiling awkwardly, she held up the stick as the green beanie guy stared back at her, another girl clinging to his arm. A girl who, if she squinted, could probably pass as her own stunt double; same dark skin tone, similar hair style...

'It does seem like no one's paying attention to them.'

'What?' asked Lexi, turning back and realizing straight away that Mark was still talking about the Sadia poster. 'Yeah, I guess everyone knows now. Or anyone who knew her.'

'Is that a lot of people?'

'Err...Fresno has a population of about a million so...probably not.'

'That big?'

'It's deceptive, I know. But compared to LA, it's tiny. Like a LEGO set.' She looked back to see if the green beanie guy was still there but, perhaps due to internal prayers to the Satanic lords, he was gone, and in his place was a narrow lane that led down to the grape strips. 'You wanna go see the AH-Bots?'

'Where?'

'Just down there, between the stalls. They pick most of the grapes.'

‘Don’t know. Is it exciting to watch?’

‘Kinda.’

‘AH-Bots picking grapes?’

‘Actually, if you watch long enough, it’s kind of hypnotic. Like, the consistent picking technique, without break or difference, just...endless picking.’

Mark turned and looked at the Sadia poster, patched in for ten, fifteen seconds...until Lexi threaded her fingers through his own and started dragging the physical part of him down towards the grape lines.

‘Trust me, you’ll like it,’ she added, feeling the sweat on his palm.

‘Yeah.’

‘Lexi guarantee.’

+++

The day after *GRAPE FEST* ran coma-slow

As did most of the evening.

Two people, one video caffè, no customers, no boss.

Pure Bōl entropy.

+++

‘This time, this time...’

Coddling yet another migraine, Lexi leaned in closer to the table and, as cautiously as she could, peeled the part of the *GRAPE FEST* sticker she had gripped in her hand.

It got about a third of the way off before it ripped.

‘Fodaaaaaaaaa,’ she said, flicking the torn piece onto the floor.

‘You want a hand?’ asked Mark, appearing with three complete stickers already peeled.

‘This one’s mine.’

‘Okay.’

‘No assistance needed.’

‘Right.’

‘Unless I’m still saying *fuck* in an hour...then I’ll let you take over.’

‘Initiating standby mode.’

He did a fake salute - which was a bit cringe, maybe a North British thing - then walked off to the next booth, while she went back to the remains of her own sticker.

Not a bad last line from me, Lexi thought, self-appraising. Better than what I used to say to Jammer when he tried to take over my tasks.

Maybe it’s the way Mark said *okay* before it?

She glanced over, watching the back of his arm as he peeled off another sticker.

Or maybe it’s cos I’m not as stubborn as other people think I am.

Yeah, that sounds more uplifting, I’ll go with that.

Re-positioning her nail next to the *F* on the sticker, she resumed scraping.

Uplifting in Japanese...what was it again?

Ureshii?

What about Portuguese?

The door opened and Juana walked in, clapping in short bursts when she saw them dealing with the stickers.

‘You can take over if you like,’ said Lexi, turning and giving raised eyebrows to Mark, who was still too busy peeling to notice.

‘Actually, comrades, I’m here to rescue you...with an impromptu filmn presentation in the back room...’

Not Robocop 2, not Robocop 2, not Robocop 2...

‘...so if you wanna flip over that closed sign and follow me.’

‘Which filmn?’ asked Lexi, giving up on the sticker.

‘A new one...that I’ve never shown you before.’

‘Longer than two hours?’

Juana went back to the door and did the closed sign herself, then turned and walked with a *Green Hell Cat* grin through and around the videos shelves.

‘That means yes,’ Lexi muttered to herself, following after the boss.

When the *STAFF ONLY* door was open, and both Lexi and Juana were next to it, Mark finally looked up from his sticker struggle and said, somewhat gormlessly, ‘what?’

‘Tourists...’ muttered Juana, not so under her breath.

+++

As with the previous night, the trio sat on the three person sofa, drinking glasses of what Juana told them was wine gifted to her by the owner of *Livid Crop*.

‘Leftovers?’ asked Lexi, swirling the blood simulacrum in her cup.

‘Eighteen bottles of it,’ replied Juana, holding up the one already open in her hand

‘Jesus...she must really like you.’

Juana smiled but without added words. Instead, she turned the volume up on the filmn - which Lexi recognized from the first shot as *Heathers* - and told them to drink up, there’s plenty more in the box.

‘Has a funny taste...’ whispered Mark to Lexi’s neck.

‘Licorice...’

‘Yeah, could be.’

‘Probably the ones they couldn’t sell.’

‘Quiet, you’re missing the filmn,’ said Juana, leaning across.

Lexi mumbled, ‘sorry’, but was overwhelmed by Mark’s countertenor. For a few milliseconds she felt annoyed, she was the veteran, he shouldn’t be more assertive than her, but then it passed and she settled down on the left hand arm of the sofa, ready to let the filmn take her.

And it did.

All three of them; the first ten minutes, they didn't exchange one word.

Until Christian Slater shot the two bullies with blanks in the school cafeteria, at which point Juana abruptly stood up and said she had to go somewhere.

'Huh?' slurred Lexi, half in a daze.

'To see a friend of mine, I just remembered. It's okay, the two of you can stay...watch the filmn, relax. Just remember to lock up when you're done.'

'You're really going?'

'Drink more wine too. There's another bottle in the box, down my side of the couch.'

'Err...okay,' said Lexi, looking at the almost full glass still in her hand. 'But a whole bottle might be a bit-...'

She stopped, seeing that Juana was already gone, her footsteps trailing in decreasing chords down the corridor outside.

'Just the two of us then...?' said Mark, finishing the rest of his wine and leaning over to Juana's side of the sofa.

'Romantic...'

'You want a top up, too?'

'Sure,' she said, quickly downing the rest of her glass.

On screen, the filmn played on.

The first Heather dispatched with drain cleaner; eulogized as a misunderstood hero at her funeral; the next Heather taking up the mantle as queen bitch; and then a cow tipping scene in a field that didn't look all that different from the one they'd seen at *GRAPE FEST* the previous day. In fact, there was a chance it might be, Fresno wasn't that far from Hollywood and they did use to shoot a lot of films nearby in the 80's. Only real difference now was the technology, the workers.

'Needs more AH-Bots,' said Lexi, her head on Mark's shoulder, hand on his thigh.

'And less cows.'

'There's only three.'

'Too immobile.'

'No, wait...in the background, over there...four.'

'They don't do anything.'

'Or is that a horse?'

'Not fun.'

The scene moved on, Winona Ryder fleeing from the frat pervert while the other Heather mimicked sex in the background, fully clothed.

'Looks uncomfortable,' said Lexi, drinking the last of her wine and putting the glass down on the floor. 'Outside...in a field...'

'I think they're drunk.'

'...with the cows watching.'

'Voyeurs.'

'Inside is better...cozier...'

'Warmer.'

'...on a couch in the back room of a video caffè.'

Mark slurred a long 'yeah' then stared at the screen for about a minute before finally turning and looking at her. Then looking back at Winona Ryder on the screen. Running eyes along the lack of slope on her jacket. Staring at the inactivity of the cows in the background. Calling himself a better cow and turning back to Lexi, who was still hovering, still on the verge of...something.

'You think we should,' he started then answered his own question by shooting towards her lips, letting her kiss back, grab the back of his head, mutter *foda* in pure husk before moving elsewhere.

Like the torture chamber scenario, it was pure chaos; his hands pulling up her *Tenebrae* t-shirt, grabbing at her tits, slowing down, stroking around the nipple with his thumb, while she slid a hand down onto his dick, pushed it into his thigh, fumbled with the top of his jeans, yelled at him to stop flicking her nipple.

In the background, the two bullies became prey in the woods, the second gunshot prompting Mark to stop with his fingers and ask Lexi if she wanted to move things to his room.

‘You mean next door?’

‘It’s got a bed.’

‘Too far,’ she replied, getting his jeans free, rubbing her hand up and down the underside of his dick then pushing off the couch and almost toppling upside-down-over as she took her knickers off.

‘Condom?’ Mark asked, pulling her back in, helping her down onto his thighs.

‘Where?’

‘I mean, do you have one?’

‘No. Fuck. *Foda.*’

‘Should we-...’

‘Move your leg over. Too cramped.’

‘You don’t-...’

‘Wah, back a bit, you’re-...’

‘Okay, moving.’

‘Bit more.’

‘Better?’

‘Yeah. *Sim. Muito.*’

Taking his dick in one hand, and rubbing herself with the other, Lexi shuffled about until the tip was propped inside then slid down slowly on top of him.

‘Fuck...’ was all Mark could say, and pretty much all Lexi had too, though she wasn’t out of it enough to forget the *foda* addition.

Or how beautifully Japanese Mark’s face was.

How confused it still looked.

Foda fucking god...

She leaned in close and kissed him as the two bullies became homosexual martyrs on the screen behind, swaying back and forth with more pace, telling him to

go faster even though she was doing most of the work, not telling him the dirtier shit that might scare him off, hoping that he wasn't one of the 98% who came within two minutes.

'Wait, wait...,' he said, clamping both hands on her hips, 'too fast, gonna cum.'

'Now?'

'Gotta think of something, distraction...'

He leaned back and looked left at the *Videodrome* poster on the wall, his hands moving up onto Lexi's breasts.

'Does that help?' she asked, looking down.

He stopped, closing his eyes.

She waited for him to finish his meditation, feeling his dick shaking inside her as he mumbled something about AH-Bots on the grape farm.

The spell faltered, prompting her to look at the doorway and picture Juana secretly spying on them from around the corner. Then a tangent to Mark himself...the potential awkwardness of the next day at work...the idea that she only liked him cos he looked Japanese and wasn't from Fresno...the thought of fucking after a year together and how bored they'd both be, even if it was in a field, with four, *do-nothing* cows watching.

'Back...,' he said, moving her hips with his hands.

'You're okay?'

'Ten seconds bursts...maybe twenty...'

'You want to go...'

The word *slower* got lost in the waves as he moved faster, both of them reduced to random shouts of 'fuck' and 'keep going', and finally Lexi shifting right next to his ear, telling him to cum inside her, it was okay, she had the meds [or she thought she did – it'd been a while since she'd last checked].

'It's okay?' he asked, panting, pulling her in atom-to-atom.

She didn't answer, just rode faster, the sound of Christian Slater's suicide monologue accompanying her as she came a few seconds after him.

As with most men she'd been with, he said, 'sorry,' as soon as he got his breath back, followed by little kisses on the shoulder, but unlike most men he didn't blame the alcohol or say it was because he liked her so much.

He just repeated, 'felt too good,' a few times.

'Yeah, me too,' she said back, resting her forehead against his and keeping it there...until the little voice in her head said *retreat, retreat* and she pulled away.

'Can't believe we did it...in here...' he said, pecking her shoulder again.

'Yeah.'

'You okay?'

'Yup.'

Lifting herself off his lap, she looked around the room for tissues, saying *fuck* when she realized there weren't any, and then *fuck* again when Christian Slater exploded on screen.

'Did he just blow up?' asked Mark, trying to stop loose cum dribbling onto the couch.

'Yeah,' she answered, spotting her wine glass, toppled over on the floor.

'*Kuso...*'

'It's the end of the filmn, guess someone...'

'...just like that...'

'...had to die.'

'...brutal.'



Lexi opened one eye and mouthed *foda* at the box with *MACA* stamped on the side.

Warehouse?

Corridor floor?

Planet MACA??

It took a second eye to confirm that she wasn't in any of those places, and then a quick backward scan to understand that Mark was tucked in behind, hand across her stomach, dick resting flaccid against the back of her thigh.

Ah, the store room.

Sofa bed.

She pushed off her share of the covers and sat up, looking at the door to the left. Then down at the floor where their clothes were.

The connecting memory brought with it a sharp jab, forcing her hands up to both temples, grinding into the bone pocket.

Images of Mark on top of her screened inside.

Then her on top of him.

Swaying back and forth.

Hair clutching.

Inane dialogue.

'Like that.'

'I can see it going in.'

'Where are the tissues?'

'You should stay longer, move in with me.'

'Is this sofa clean?'

'What's that mark on your knee?'

'Foda foda foda foda foda...'

She reached down for her loyal *Tenebrae* t-shirt and slipped it on, then looked back at her new Japanese-Scouse lover. Boyfriend. Temporary sex partner. Ship in the shortest of nights.

Something in her brain told her it wasn't right.

'This isn't really him.'

'This isn't really you.'

And she tried to push it away, throw it off a cliff, drown it in the sea, but it was insistent and when she pictured again the scenes from the night before, it wasn't her playing the female role, it was someone else, someone with the same dark skin, a Brazilian model, speaking fluent Japanese, fluent Portuguese, fluent Slovene, fluent...

'You getting up?'

The room broke back in, Mark's fingers running a curved line down her arm.

'Work time,' she answered, reaching for her knickers.

'Already?'

'You need to get up too.'

'Kuuuuuso.'

'Yup.'

+++

As usual, the *morning rush* was effortlessly ironic.

Between the time Lexi opened the doors and midday, a grand total of eight customers came in to have coffee and a pastry, and all but two of them ordered to go.

‘Don’t know if it’s good or bad,’ said Mark, sipping from a *Robocop* mug he’d found in the back room, the visor and lips protruding outwards.

‘Good,’ replied Lexi quickly.

‘So much time doing nothing...but not really enough time to do anything.’

‘Huh?’

‘Anything productive, I mean.’

Lexi held up her phone, showcasing the Portuguese article she was reading.

‘Yeah, maybe that. But you can’t really focus on it full blast...cos a customer might call you over at any moment.’

She laughed, putting her hand on his thigh and then laughed again in a slightly embarrassed way when a finger brushed a little higher up.

‘That’s my phone,’ he said, deadpan.

‘Is it?’

‘No, not really.’

She moved her hand above the counter and hit him on the arm.

‘Ah, you’re a hitter.’

‘Head-butter, actually. But there are customers...’

He laughed, authentic, not nervous, and drank more of his *Robocop* coffee.

‘Don’t worry about it too much, you’re still in the early stages.’

‘Of?’

‘Working here. Being anxious about missing a customer with their hand up, or getting shouted at for not doing enough. Give it a few weeks and you’ll be a lethargic koala just like me.’

‘You’re probably right.’

Lexi shifted her phone across the counter and scrolled back to the top of the article. ‘Here, we can read it together. Practise a little.’

‘Portuguese?’

‘Try the first paragraph, see how we go.’

‘Err...I know *obrigado* and *foda* and that’s about it.’

‘It’s okay, we can do it like an exchange. I help you with this, you teach me Japanese later.’

‘That could be tough. I’m not much of a teacher.’

‘Me neither. But it’ll be fun. And it’ll kill most of the afternoon...then we can close up and go play *Nightmare Castle*.’

‘Tonight?’

‘Unless you have other plans...in your back room?’

He sipped more coffee from the *Robocop* mug then looked down at her phone and squinted at the Portuguese text.

‘It’s okay, if you want some space...’ she added, digging a nail into her palm.

‘Sorry, I was just trying to understand this text. *Nightmare Castle* sounds fine. If it’s just the two of us?’

‘*Sim*. I was thinking we could call Lavinia this time, get her to sacrifice an NPC...’

‘Even better.’

‘...or one of those *Harem Survival* pervs.’

‘Long as it’s not a goat.’

Lexi laughed, putting a hand on his knee. It seemed to take him by surprise as he shuffled awkwardly on his stool before taking another sip from an almost empty coffee cup.

‘Didn’t touch your phone again, did I?’

‘No, it’s-...I’m sensitive...on my knee.’

‘Ah, the hidden erogenous zone,’ she answered, removing her hand.

‘It’s okay, you can put it back. Just the first touch is weird...sometimes.’

‘How about the thigh?’

‘Better.’

She acted out a soap opera nod, taking some of her own coffee...then went back to the Portuguese waiting patiently on her phone. After muttering some words she only half understood, her hand finally re-activated and placed itself on Mark's thigh.

'We'll try the first paragraph then.'

+++

Around half nine, Juana waltzed in with another two bottles of leftover wine from *GRAPE FEST* and asked them both if they were ready for *Possession*.

'A new filmn?'

'No, no, no, no. An experience, like *Fitzcarraldo* or *Stalker*. Or *Dust Ya Mage* for you younger pups. Don't worry, you'll survive it. I'll go set up the projector.'

'Actually, we can't tonight,' replied Lexi, her *Salifa X* jacket already half on.

'Oh, going out somewhere?'

'Across the road.'

'Nightmare Palace?'

'Castle. *Sim*.'

Juana looked down at the two bottles of wine gripped in each hand, then through the window at the hundred-strong queue outside the VR plaza.

'We can watch the filmn tomorrow night,' said Lexi, putting her jacket the rest of the way on.

'Of course we can. There's no rush with Żulawski. You lovebirds go and have fun.'

Both Lexi and Mark opened their mouths, but no denials glided out. Apparently, it was obvious, even to a woman who barely saw them.

'Go on, stop loitering.'

'Thanks, Juana,' said Lexi, tugging Mark on his hoodie sleeve.

'Yeah...thanks.'

+++

To Lexi's obvious annoyance, the torture chamber in *Nightmare Castle* wasn't as empty as it had been two nights earlier, with another couple busy sacrificing an NPC to Lavinia the Goddess of Death while they had to make do with hovering by the mace shelf at the top of the stairs.

'They're not even chanting properly,' Lexi complained, pulling at the collar of her period-inaccurate dress.

'Hopefully they'll get bored soon.'

'Yeah, or Lavinia will.'

Mark laughed, peeking round the corner of the staircase wall and then laughing again when he heard the guy on the rack say, 'girl, your skin is like a fucking blueberry.'

Luckily, he was right; the spell of the azure-skinned Goddess soon wore off and the couple patched out exactly where they stood.

'Game time...' said Mark, eyes on the rack.

Lexi moved down first, calling Lavinia back with a Romanian sounding chant, and then asking her to read out excerpts from the *Munich Manual*. Clearly not programmed with that text, Lavinia improvised with random quotes from various occult horror films, most of them taken from the antagonist.

'You think her blue skin is erotic?' asked Lexi from the rack, studying Lavinia's cleavage without any attempt at disguise.

'A bit.'

'Maybe I should get the paint out...'

'For your whole body?'

'*Sim.*'

'I'll help you with the dress.'

‘Boa idea.’ Lexi grabbed his hand and pulled him in close, looking at his lips instead of kissing them, then guided him over to the second staircase; the one that led down to the pendulum.

‘Here?’ Mark asked, checking back on Lavinia and her continued monologuing.

‘Here,’ replied Lexi, lifting up the hem of her dress.

+++

Pushing open the door, Lexi called out a drunken ‘*kaerimashita*,’ used her Tenant Card on the lights, then headed inside.

With a bit more apprehension, Mark followed.

‘Do I need to take off my shoes?’ he asked, getting a footstool slid over to him as a reply. ‘What about your flat mate?’

‘No worries, he’s probably studying Japanese. In fact...’ She disappeared down the narrow hallway and knocked on a door not too far along. ‘Hey, Japanese master. There’s a real *Nihonjin* here to talk to you.’

Mark flinched at the word *real* and continued with his shoes.

About a minute later, a Swedish-looking guy with bed hair appeared in the living room, saying a few nervous words in Japanese then leaping quickly to English.

Ignoring Lexi’s cartoon eyeballs in the hallway, Mark apologized for waking him up and asked if Lexi forced all her other boyfriends to do this kind of routine.

‘What the-...’ Lexi yelled, stopping herself at the last second, then changing her mind and saying *fuck* anyway.

‘I wouldn’t know. You’re the first one.’

‘First?’

‘Apart from that one guy she brought back from the-...’

The flat mate’s line was cut short by Lexi punching him in the back, then ordering him to speak more Japanese.

‘Too tired...’ he replied, translating it to *tsukareta* after a two second delay.

‘No, it’s our fault for being so loud,’ said Mark in Japanese.

The flat mate nodded and said, ‘*hai*.’ Then turned and hurried back to his room.

After the door was audibly shut, Lexi came into the living room and dragged Mark over to the couch, explaining to him that there wasn’t any guy she’d brought back and, actually, he was the first boyfriend she’d had in nearly two years.

‘If we’re calling you a boyfriend,’ she amended, picking up the remote and turning on *GENTE+*.

‘I don’t mind.’

‘Then it’s settled. Mark-kun. Enjoy your status as the first guy to visit my flat. What do you wanna watch?’

‘Don’t know. Anything. *Doctor Who*?’

‘Huh?’

‘Never mind. Something else.’

‘What the *foda* is *Doctor Who*?’

‘*Robocop*?’

+++

After getting through two episodes of the aborted *I’m All Alone In The Kuiper Belt And That’s Okay* web serial spin off, Lexi turned to Mark, clutched his shoulder bone and announced that time was ripe to do the Japanese lesson.

‘Now?’

‘In the classical learning environment of bed.’

‘Err...’

She patted his thigh and got up, telling him to follow close behind as he might get lost in the maze of the three-metre corridor.

Eleven seconds later, they were in her room, with an unsurprising poster of *Nightmare Castle* pinned up on the wall above the bed. Still semi-drunk, they quickly

took off their clothes and got under the covers...then threw the covers off too when Mark started sweating.

‘Go back a bit,’ Lexi said, turning on her side, putting his hand over her chest.

‘From here?’

‘I like this position.’

‘You need warming up?’

‘No.’

‘Bit of stroking maybe?’

‘Go, I’m ready.’

‘Okay...boss. Going.’

Kissing her on the shoulder a few times as token foreplay, Mark reached down and maneuvered himself inside. Lexi breathed out a *fuck* and pulled him in closer. As he settled into a slow rhythm, his hand gradually moved down to her hips, and the rest of him leaned back so he could a) not get overheated by touching her skin and, b) see his dick going inside.

‘Closer,’ Lexi said, grabbing hold of his wrist and pulling him back in.

‘Too hot...’

‘Hold me tight...your arm.’

‘Seriously, I’m sweating.’

‘Don’t care. Tighter.’

He did as she wished, merging with her back and having little choice but to bury his face in the wild nest that was her hair.

Tighter, tighter, tighter, tighter, she thought, digging nails into his hand.

After it was done, Lexi rolled over him full weight and fished for the tissue box on the floor. Beyond it, there were the language books – Japanese, Portuguese, Romanian etc. – staring up at her. The children’s books, too. *Kill the Mouse* in Portuguese. *Pluto Ya* in Japanese. *Glib Koala Ninja* in Urdu.

Don’t need to go anywhere, Lexi.

You can stay right here, on the bed, with us.

Safe and comfortable.

Cocooned and

‘Can you reach them?’ asked Mark, stroking her lower back.

‘*Sim,*’ she replied, pulling herself back up, throwing him a clump of disorganized tissues. ‘Wah, I just had a thought...about us.’

‘A good one?’

‘Maybe. Possibly. Depends how you feel about Fresno.’

Mark shifted, scrunching up the first tissue and dropping it on the floor.

‘In the short term, I mean,’ she added, taking a tissue of her own and wiping herself.

‘I’m okay here...with you.’

‘On this bed?’

‘Sure. It’s better than a sofa.’

She scrunched up her tissue and threw it on the floor...then climbed up his torso until her face was level with his.

‘What is it?’ he asked, looking down at her shoulder.

I’m so fucking happy you’re here.

Enduring my cowardice.

Making me feel good.

Please don’t go.

Don’t go, Mark-kun.

Don’t go or I’ll cut off your ankles.

Glue myself to your lungs.

Your going-elsewhere heart.

Your abandoning-

‘Japanese time,’ Lexi said, kissing him on the bottom lip then rolling off the bed and taking one of the language books from the shelf.

‘At 3am?’

‘3am here. 8pm in Tokyo.’

‘Err...’

‘Or is it 9pm? Can’t remember.’ She sat down on the foot-end of the bed, back against the wall, book open. ‘Come on, shift over. I need your brain.’

+++

way out of sync
gnawing on a giant leg of chicken
yelling at the man to keep painting
keep painting until the body’s blue and then
then he could have access to his goat
but only if he-
a banging noise, outside the castle.

Lexi turned and the candles changed to photos and the walls altered themselves into other walls and the chair beneath flipped sideways and morphed into a modern template bed and-

She opened her eyes.

The familiar sight of her room, blotched in shadow, with a silhouette sat at the end of the bed, head pointed towards a glowing screen.

Mark-kun.

Her alien boyfriend.

Already pulling away and-

She shrieked, yelled *foda*, both mute monochrome inside, then crawled over towards him before her brain could start cranking out more convincing levels of doubt and

actual banshee cries and
reaching his shoulder, she peered round the side.

He didn’t seem to notice her movement, or her breathing, and continued communing with the screen.

Some kind of writing...poetry by the looks of it.

*My fingers are fire and my legs are fire and my insides are waiting for
fire
to burn the boredom away
the unbearable dull light
surrounding me
enveloping me
becoming me
ME the girl of ether*

There was still a lot more to read, but Lexi couldn't be bothered with obvious teen, ennui shit so she leaned in close to Mark's back and gave him a spell-breaking kiss.

Or so she thought.

Based on his complete lack of reaction, it was like she'd done nothing at all. Just a speck of dust falling on his skin. An anemic mosquito with its tarsus padded.

'What are you doing?' she asked, rising up into a sitting position.

He blinked, slowly like a possessed monk, and turned, eyes instantly settling on her forehead.

'Are you okay?'

He frowned, looking back at his phone screen.

'What is it?'

'How long have I been here?'

'In Fresno?'

'Yes.'

'About two weeks.'

'No. That's not it. Feels strange.'

'What does?'

'I don't know.'

'Staying here, at my place?'

He looked back at her, then at the *Nightmare Castle* poster on the wall behind. Then acquiesced to it and turned off his phone.

'We should get some sleep. Work tomorrow.'

'*Boa* idea,' she replied, suppressing the thousand other things in her head and sliding back under the covers.

+++

Mark's zombie impression followed Lexi into the Sumerian dream realm, through a no-fruit breakfast and all the way up to the counter at the caffè the next day, when she finally lost patience and asked him about it, and he, with genuine Shelley Duvall face, pretended not to have a clue what she was on about.

'I woke up and you were staring, like hypnotised, at your phone,' she explained, pressing pause on the Japanese travel vlog they were watching.

'Hypnotised?'

'Then you asked me how long you'd been in Fresno...and said it was strange when I told you it'd been two weeks.'

'I did?'

'Yeah.'

'I said all that?'

She hesitated, assessing the very real look of confusion on his face. Then turned to the two grinning vloggers on the phone screen. 'Maybe it was a kind of sleepwalking thing, or sleep-sitting...something like that.'

'Fuck...I seriously can't remember anything.'

'*Sim*, it was pretty weird, but...I don't know...thinking about it now, maybe not that bad. I mean, you didn't speak in tongues or anything.'

'What else did I say?'

‘Nothing, that was it.’

‘Wah...sounds so creepy.’

‘It’s fine, you were probably just half asleep, like immersion haze or something. Doesn’t really matter.’ She held up her phone, not realizing the screen was dark.

‘How about we get back to the Japanese vid?’

‘*Kuso*. Really can’t remember any of it. Immersion haze...’

‘The vid?’

‘What? Yeah...sorry, I’m still a bit-...sure, the vid. If you like.’

‘I do.’

+++

The rest of the day passed pretty much on cosmological standby mode.

[Very] limited number of customers.

Some art students scanning the video shelves.

Poor attempts at Japanese [from her].

Even poorer attempts at Portuguese [from him].

Beginner, up-in-flames Urdu.

When their language study hit a brick wall, they tried a few articles on *Big Brain Bakunin*, but there weren’t many new ones, and what they did have was mostly Deleuze-based and neither of them had the energy for that chaos. Muttering *tal vez mais tarde* under her breath, Lexi switched to random clips of the occult on GENTE+ while Mark ducked into the back room and returned minutes later with his increasingly worn-looking copy of *Moon Prison*.

As she watched him read and sip from the same type of coffee he’d ordered every day since he started there, Lexi wondered how long it’d be before he got bored.

Bored of this place, bored of teaching Japanese, bored of fucking in the torture chamber of *Nightmare Castle*, in her bed, bored of Fresno, bored of her.

Then flipped it round and thought, how long till I’m bored of him?

Repetitive coffee.

Juvenile-looking sci-fi novels.

Only occasional Japanese.

Sluggish cloud-stroke-aura of passivity.

Lexi looked down at her own coffee, in her usual *No Feeling Bear* cup, then back up at Mark.

He wasn't reading anymore, his eyes were pointed at something in the background. A customer?

Shifting her body on the stool, she almost let out a *last girl* gasp when she saw another Japanese guy strolling up to the counter.

'Ryu...?' said Mark, knocking into her elbow as he moved up parallel.

'Sorry?' replied the Japanese man, the expression on his face completely at odds with the tone.

'You were over there, at the VR plaza.'

'The what?'

'Two nights ago. I saw you. The VR plaza across the road.'

'Is this guy okay?' the Japanese man asked Lexi, taking a very thin wallet out of his lilac *Fila* jacket.

'He's fine. Just a bit overworked. What would you like?'

'Overworked...'

'It's busier in the afternoons,' replied Lexi, following the man's panoramic scan, trying to ignore the fact that he looked kind of like the medical rep from *Planet Dark*.

'I doubt that.'

'Sorry?'

'I said, hmm, what to drink? Let's see. Coffee, coffee, coffee, coffee. Nope. Looks disgusting. Ah, how about that weird tea up there, in the pic?'

Lexi repeated the order in slo-mo, nudging Mark in the hip as he was still standing there obelisk-like, possibly malfunctioning. It didn't work the first, second or

fifth time, but when she turned and told him directly to go and make the tea, the lights finally switched back on.

‘What the hell’s wrong with you?’ she asked, after the Japanese man had parked himself in the booth with the *Phantasm II* poster.

‘Faulty memory...I guess.’

‘About that guy?’

‘Sorry, it’s-...I’m okay now.’

A little while later, the door opened and Juana came in, warning them that she was about to say the exact same thing she’d said the night before.

‘The wild experience filmn?’

‘No escape this time.’ She looked around, spotting the Japanese customer, who was slowly rotating his cup of weird tea and staring right back at her. ‘Is he normal?’ she asked Lexi, lowering her voice.

‘Relatively.’

‘He’s staring at me.’

‘Maybe he likes you.’

Juana turned back round, tapping the edge of the counter. ‘I think we’ll close early tonight. You can tell Mr. Stasi over there the good news.’

‘Err...okay.’

‘I’ll go warm up the projector.’

Glancing left, she told Mark to stop looking so distant then spun back round rubbing her hands, getting out, ‘wait until you see the metro scene in this-,’ before jump-cutting into a desperate, ‘WAH!’ and almost falling sideways into the counter.

‘Hello boss lady,’ said the Japanese customer, propped up rigid only a few inches away.

‘How the-...’

‘You know, your eyes have the strangest yellowest tint. Contacts, I presume.’

‘What?’

‘Sorry, we’re closing up,’ interjected Lexi, reaching out a hand to keep Juana steady.

‘Yes, I heard that.’

‘Right now, in fact.’

‘Understood.’

Lexi said ‘thank you’ reflexively then waited for him to move...but he didn’t. Not even a half rotation to look at the exit. He just continued to stand there, observing carefully as Juana moved round the side and headed towards the video shelves, then shifting his gaze to Mark on the left.

‘You’ve already paid,’ said Lexi, tilting her head a bit to try and get his attention.

‘I know.’

‘Okay. So...’

The man mumbled something in reply - sounded like *money*, strangled - and then moved over to Mark’s side of the counter, his head completely uninterested in checking for stray chair legs or not-yet-dry spillages on the tiles below. When the counter got close enough, he put his elbows on the surface and leaned forward until his eyes were no more than an inch from Mark’s face.

For some reason, Mark didn’t react at all.

No blinks, no *what the keuso?*

Just complete void shutdown.

‘Sorry, but we really are closing,’ Lexi repeated, glancing at Juana for help and flinching when she saw her boss back near the counter, both eyes electric yellow.

‘Signal received,’ the Japanese man said, putting a hand out to flip over the cover of *Moon Prison*.

‘Ryu...’ Mark said again, still utterly frozen.

‘Nice title.’

‘It is you...’

‘Pity it’s not real.’

‘...isn’t it?’

The Japanese man let go of the book and moved his hands onto the sides of Mark's head, partially covering his ears. For a moment, it looked like he was reeling back to headbutt him, but instead, he launched forward and landed awkwardly on Mark's top lip. Readjusted a little and took in the bottom one too.

'Hey... ' shouted Lexi, raising a limp hand as if she were in class.

The kiss lasted another seven seconds before the Japanese man abandoned Mark's face and turned to face Juana, who had moved forward at some point, hands and nails up like claws.

'There you are, Wolverine...' he said, wiping something off his lips.

She faltered a second, closing her eyes to block out the yellow glow, then opened them again. Put a slow palm on the Japanese nut's purple sleeve and asked, in pure succubus tone, if he'd like to come into the back room and watch a filmn together.

Lexi tried to stop it, but her *what the fuck?* was out before she could flag down the first neuron.

Luckily, Juana and the Japanese lunatic were already in their own separate realm.

'A cunning offer, but I'm done here,' said the Japanese man, stepping to the side of Juana and, with a slanted smile, gently removing her palm from his sleeve.

'We have wine,' said Juana, switching to the other one. 'From the *GRAPE FEST?*

'Leftovers.'

'A very good vintage...and the sofa back there is very comfortable. You can sit next to Mark here.'

'Juana,' interrupted Lexi, instinctively picking up her cup and gripping it like a petrol bomb.

'No, no...he's all yours now, Yaqui,' replied the Japanese man, pulling the door open and looking back over at a paralyzed Mark. 'Prepped and ready.'

A quick wink, probably at his own line, then he was gone.

‘What the fuck was that all about?’ Lexi blurted out, moving quickly over to the door and locking it.

‘Out of town oddball,’ replied Juana, dusting the palm that had touched the man’s sleeve, then walking off towards the *STAFF ONLY* door.

‘Yeah, and you too, idiot...asking him to watch a filmn with us-...hey, where you going?’

‘To warm up the projector.’

‘Huh, still?’

Juana kept going, pushing the staff door open and disappearing beyond. Saying a few variations on *fucking weirdo*, Lexi hurried over to Mark, asking if his lips were okay.

‘Dizzy...’ he replied, touching his temples. ‘Headache.’

‘Let’s get you a Panadol and a nice, soft sofa. Or...a sofa.’

‘Sofa...okay.’

‘And something to scrub your lips.’

Mark nodded, robotic, managing the smallest possible *yes*.

+++

Twenty minutes later, the three survivors of the Japanese pervert encounter were sat on the back room couch, watching the opening scene of *Possession*.

Lexi was on the left hand side, glass in hand, slightly annoyed that she’d a] let Juana talk her into staying and b] allowed herself to drink that *GRAPE FEST* wine again.

It couldn’t be good for Mark’s headache, yet...there he was...sipping on it like it was a carton of *Ribena Fresh*.

‘Stop stewing, Lexi, and drink up,’ Juana said, swirling her own glass then taking a long sip.

‘I’m not thirsty.’

'It'll help calm your nerves.'

'So will being at home.'

'Ah, but then you'd have to go outside.'

Lexi mumbled something in reply, the pragmatic part of her brain warning her not to push back too much. Besides, Juana was half right. The guy could still be out there, waiting for them. Maybe it was better to watch the filmn for two hours, drink some low quality wine to cool down, give Mark a head massage at some point.

Taking her own advice, she took a sip from her glass.

'Good girl,' said Juana, swirling her own wine again, this time without drinking.

The filmn played on.

More wine flowed down her throat.

Eyelids got heavy.

Filmn got weird.

Mark's shoulder made a nice pillow.

Sounds shot around jagged, making no real sense.

Body became balloon-like.

Drifting into a wide, welcoming-

She jerked up, knocking Mark's glass out of his hand and onto the floor. Luckily, there was almost no wine in it.

'What...?' she muttered, looking around.

The other side of the sofa was empty. Juana-less.

On the screen, a woman in a pretty blue dress was pinballing through a deserted metro station, cackling like an ecstatic loon.

And Mark was staring dead forward, hand seemingly glued to his temple, entranced.

'So tired...?' she said, trying to lift up an arm to rub her eyelids and managing about half a second before the weight was too much.

'This isn't right,' replied Mark, monotone.

'What?'

‘The V guy...’

‘Who?’

‘...she ate him. Downstairs. I saw it. She ate his brain. Bits of his brain. No. No. It’s right there, I can see it. I can see her eating him. His brain.’

Lexi heard the words *see her* and followed Mark’s line of sight back to the screen. The metro woman was still hysterical...throwing milk at the walls, shrieking out animal noises. God, just watching her was exhausting...as if the energy was being transferred directly through the screen and into her frontal lobe, making it feel like it was Lexi herself who was having the psychotic break...draining her of all possible-

‘Have to move,’ Mark continued, swaying a little. ‘Escape. Two of us.’

‘Escape...’

‘Now.’

‘You can’t...’

She slumped downwards into the couch and reached out a hand to pull him back, to stop him leaving this very comfortable lifeboat, but there was no need, cos now he was slumped too, head tilted towards her shoulder and her own head on the back of the couch, fixed on the projection screen, the images of blood and milk so soft and soothing, the blue dress so pretty in its simple-

A cough came from the doorway, just loud enough for Lexi to turn and say, ‘wah.’

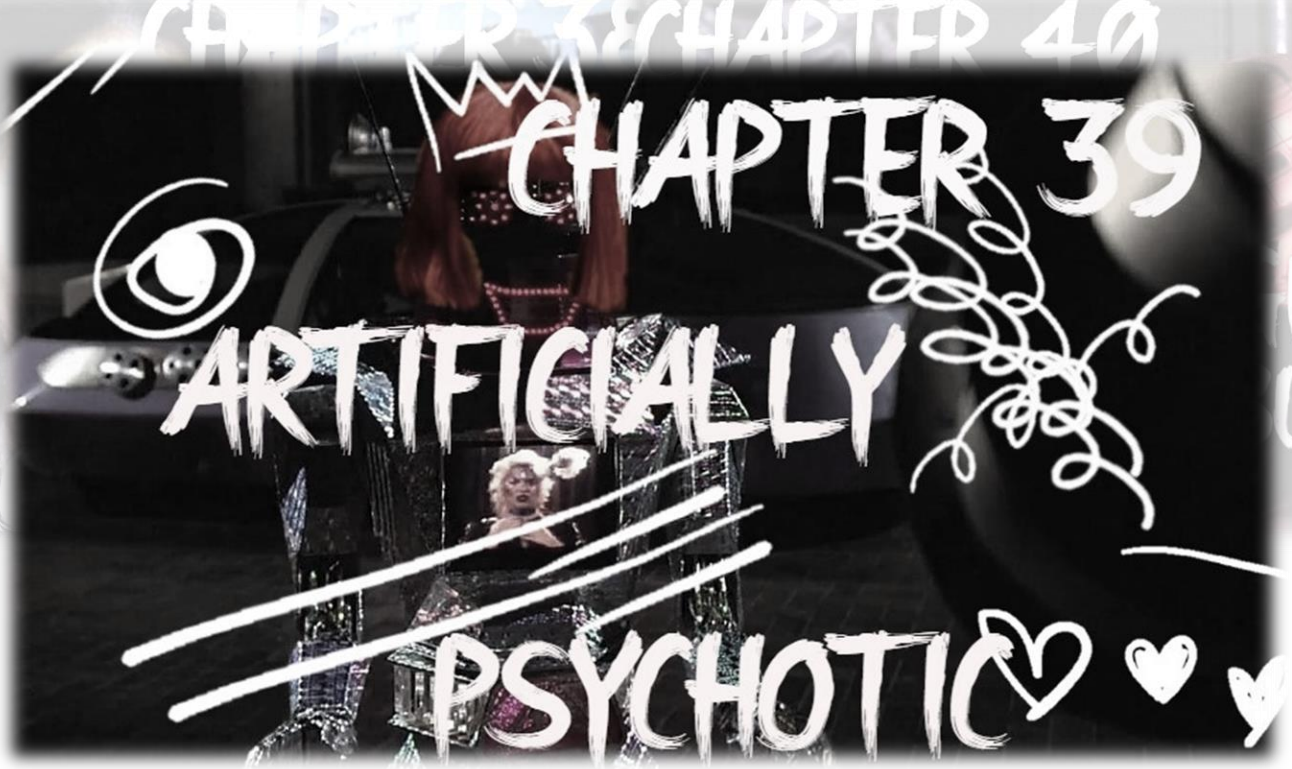
It was Juana, leaning against the frame, the wine in her glass all gone.

‘The filmn,’ she said, gesturing towards the screen.

Lexi grunted and turned back, confused when she couldn’t see the blue dress spasm woman anymore.

Or the metro.

Or the milk dripping down the-



V

on the back of a neck, license plate

scalp off

spoon dipped in and

suplex yellow eyes

sub-neon

no sign of struggle or

Tenebrae shirt

on the floor

it's okay, I've got the meds

don't stop

stay

here with me short-term

Nightmare Castle

absorb Portuguese juntos

you can be my

Adjani screams collapsed in on the words.

Lights at the screen ahead. Blue dress woman bleeding milk and blood from all orifices. In a Metro with zero commuters, zero life, zero-

Wait, I know this.

This filmn.

Isabella Adjani and the-

My eyes adjusted.

I did a literal, active full circle with my head, taking in the wine glasses on the floor, the non-moving fan on the ceiling, the projection screen putting out *Possession*.

Kuso, it wasn't a dream, this was-

A sleeve appeared from my left, pulling me back down.

'Lexi...' I said, checking the doorway behind and almost falling off the couch when I saw the Mexican cannibal poet leaning against the frame, eyes glaring yellow.

'Are you awake?' she asked, in the strangest tone.

'You're...' I started in reply, but a dozen firewalls activated in my brain, stopping me from saying out loud that I knew what she was.

Nodding at the projection screen, she turned and walked right, heading towards the only thing down there; the *BOSS ONLY* basement door.

Good, I thought. You go that way, we'll go left.

'Lexi,' I said again, turning back to my colleague/girlfriend on the sofa, trying to push down the flashes of her without the *Tenebrae* t-shirt, on top of me, behind a Japanese kids book, distant in a grape field.

She didn't respond.

Not even a single blink.

'Lexi, we have to go. Your boss is...not well...dangerous.'

A shake of her arm.

'She's drugging us with the wine.'

Hand wave in front of her eyes.

'Eating people in the basement.'

The lightest possible slap of her cheek.

‘Lexi...’

It was no good, the filmn had her.

I stood up, checking various parts of the projection screen for an off-switch. It was an old-fashioned type of technology, which meant the controls were probably somewhere I couldn’t predict, maybe that box at the back of the room.

Avoiding the wine glass on the floor, I walked over and pushed the buttons on the front and the side.

Nothing responded on screen.

Except the German-looking guy getting nicked by Adjani and her kitchen knife.

And Lexi putting a wrist to her ear.

Huh?

Some form of communication?

Invisible watch?

Clearly picking something up on the airwaves, Lexi muttered, ‘coming,’ and then pushed herself up. She looked at the space on the sofa where I’d been sitting two minutes previously, and then over at the back of the room, where I was currently planted.

Another memory hit.

The tall guy...the one who went off to NASCAR...he did the same thing, with the V customer who got his brain eaten downstairs.

But those two were strangers...Lexi was my-...

Her hand touched my arm, wraith-like, voice whispering, ‘this way.’

‘Lexi...’ I tried again, as both legs vetoed my explicit commands not to move and marched the rest of my body out into the MACA box corridor. ‘She’s controlling you somehow. The filmn, that screen...the wine.’

‘This way,’ she repeated, elbow knocking into one of the boxes.

‘No, we have to go left...’

‘Five minutes.’

‘...the other way, not-...Lexi, wake up. Listen to my fucking voice, please. She is going to kill me down there. Eat my brain.’

‘Yes, it is relaxing in the basement.’

‘No, not relaxing, dangerous, homicidal. We have to go the other way, get outside onto the street, around people.’

She smiled and prodded me on with a single finger, the *BOSS ONLY* door looming up ahead, lit neon-Fulci by the flickering green bulb.

Okay, enough persuasion, I told myself. Grab her arm, her legs, drag her out of this fucking nightmare abattoir.

The words were stark and assertive, yet each time I tried to physically move my hand to grab her jacket sleeve or the bottom of her *Tenebrae* t-shirt, it just turned into a vague fob at nothingness. As if I were drunkenly swatting a fly.

And my legs...would not obey me...at all.

Was it the film? The wine?

But how could it still be controlling me when I remembered everything?

It didn’t make sense, and continued to not make sense as Lexi walked me like a *care in the community* patient down the basement stairs. My eyes remained operational, independent, though part of me wished they didn’t as I could see Juana at her desk, back turned, the brain-eating spoon resting next to her hand as she fiddled with something.

‘You can’t do this,’ I shouted, pointing my mouth towards the upper window that I thought might spill out onto the main street outside. ‘I’m conscious, I know what you’re doing. I’ll scream.’

‘Go ahead, the walls are fully soundproofed,’ Juana said, spinning round slowly on her swivel chair, patting the little wooden stool in front of her. ‘And only junkies use the alley outside.’

‘Kuso...’ I muttered, glancing down and shivering when I saw the dried bloodstain by my shoes.

She hadn’t even scrubbed the floor properly.

‘Come, sit,’ said Juana, patting the stool again.

Behind her, on the desk, a clock-like device whirred into action...spiraling black and green orbits inward.

Wah, that’s what she was fiddling with...

For what, hypnosis?

Lexi nudged me in the back, hard, echoing her puppet master’s command to sit.

Despite every neuron in my head screaming ‘MURDER STOOL,’ I did as I was told.

‘Relax, Mark,’ said Juana, tone doctor-like, placing a soft hand...or claw...on my right shoulder. ‘I’m not giving up on you yet.’

‘You ate his brain...the V guy...’

A flinch of the claw, a quick glance at the alley window, then cyborg calm again. ‘Yes...the V guy. There is the problem. How is it exactly that you remember that?’

‘How? I fucking saw it. You used the spoon on him, ate his...’

‘Okay, redundant question, clearly.’

‘...brain, made the tall guy, Jammer, attack me.’

‘Hmm. Okay. Let’s see...’ Juana moved her hand up to my left temple, then matched it with the other hand on the right side. ‘...if we can adjust things a little. Try to concentrate on the spiral to the right. *My* right.’

Once again, I tried to move my arm to push her away...and when that failed, my head. I even made a biting run at her cheek, but there was absolutely no momentum behind it.

All I could do was sit there, lose myself in green and black loops and get slowly...systematically eaten. With my supposed girlfriend standing golem-faced nearby.

‘Don’t be too harsh on her,’ said Juana, apparently tuned into my head station...or reading the manic glint in my eyes as I strained my neck left towards Lexi. ‘She really does like you. And I have a soft spot for her, too. Which is why my hands are perched softly on your temples and not digging into the top of your skull.’

She smiled again, making an 'ah' sound.

'What are you doing?' I asked, more to the spirals than her.

'Readjustment.'

'To make me forget your murdering-...'

'To help you continue your burgeoning romance with Lexi, here in my lovely, quaint VHS caffè. That is a good thing, sì?'

'Not for the V guy.'

'Oh, come on, don't waste tears on him. He groped Lexi in the corridor upstairs. Tried to push her into your sofa bed room...before Jammer turned up to subdue him.'

'What, you only eat rapists?'

'Rapists, murderers, thugs, bullies, evangelicals...contrarians. It's actually not as difficult as you might think. Even with arguments of relativism, there is always a steady supply. Especially here in Fresno. That Japanese man earlier, for example. You saw yourself the way he came in and-...'

She stopped abruptly, a muffled shriek erupting followed by the frantic waving of her hands as if she'd just been burnt or electrocuted by my temples.

'What?' I asked, trying to rotate my eyeballs to look up at my own head.

My scalp on fire? The hair?

Didn't feel like it. No heat or built-up electricity.

Juana took several cavernous breaths, each one utterly beyond human in its sound, then turned to the spoon on the desk.

'What is it?' I asked again, watching her pick it up.

'I'm sorry, Mark...'

'What?'

'Something in your head...is resistant. Aggressively so.' She lodged the handle of the spoon in her mouth then positioned her fingers, which had elongated and sharpened, on top of my skull. 'I have no choice.'

'Wait...what do you mean, resistant?'

'Lexi will understand.'

'Where? How?'

'I'll tell her you went to Portland to look for Sadia. That you tried to fuck me in the back room. Both together should be sufficient.'

Psycho witch doctor cunt box shot into my head but was beaten to the gate by another *NO*, this one in barked capitals. Then a stifled groan as her nails started to dig in.

'Useless fucking stumps,' I shouted down at my two paralysed arms, 'do something!'

But they did nothing, just continued hanging there, stump-like.

No, worse...didn't even feel like my own limbs...no sense of being attached to my shoulders, no cohesion, bond of-...

'It's okay, I can limit the pain,' Juana said, the yellow in her eyes subsuming both irises.

'Lexi...' I tried, unsure if she was even still there.

'Just focus on the spirals and relax. Let the fog take you.'

I played back the words, sucking in haze conceptually, letting it set up shop and distribute leaflets and issue out tendrils of invisible nebula fumes to make the basement softer and three times more swirly.

Juana's eyes became eight citrine orbs, moving like electrons around her head. Shifting, swarming, veering away from-...

'Niche little murder-pad you've got here,' came a voice from somewhere in the shadows.

The swirls ruptured, evaporated.

The haze thinned.

The eight orbs coalesced back into a single pair and Juana's claws appeared from the flanks, forming themselves rapidly into an unorthodox, defensive posture.

'This is a private area,' she said, face tilted towards the stairs.

'Door was open.'

Wait, that voice...

'Get out.'

'When I just got in? Unlikely.'

Without any kind of expectation, I attempted to twist my head round...and for god knows what reason, it worked...I could rotate and see the stairs...the Japanese customer stepping onto the same concrete patch where Jammer had bled out god knows how many days ago.

'Ryu...'

'Looks like I interrupted something intimate.'

'No, it's-...she's trying to-...'

'Eat out your brain bag. Yes, I can see that.'

'Psycho witch...' I turned back to Juana the cannibal, reflex-squinting at the two yellow orbs then relaxing a little when I realized they'd lost some of their glare.

'She's digging in, trying to eat me.'

I couldn't see, but I heard a whistle and then footsteps on the stone part of the floor.

'Ah, you've got the little spiral trap set up.'

'That is not the way out,' said Juana, switching off the swirly device on the desk.

'And a little feasting spoon. How quaint.'

I shifted again, trying to see how much progress the Japanese man was making, how drunk his movements were, but was stopped by a claw tightening on my scalp.

'No, it really does feel quite cozy down here.'

'Get out, call the cops...' I shouted, mostly at the ceiling.

'Unless you're the pawn, of course.'

'Go, call them, now, quickly.'

'Keni...please. A little less screechy. I'm trying to acclimatize to the milieu of this charming little basement.'

'What...'

‘If you wanna acclimatize faster,’ cut in Juana, dropping one hand on to her retro Slazenger jacket, bringing down the zip. ‘Why don’t you come here, sit next to me?’

The Japanese customer shook his head, raising a hand in mock apology.

‘Ah, am I not your type?’

‘Seduction really is beneath you, *jefa*.’

Juana removed her hand from the jacket zip and locked onto Lexi, who was still stuck in her golem state. ‘Bring him here.’

The phrase seemed to dislodge the spanner in her brain, the head nodding and the rest of her body shifting towards the Japanese intruder.

‘No, Lexi, don’t...’ I started, reaching out an arm and...wait, an arm...I could move that too?

Stretching out my fingers and making magic spell flicks confirmed it.

Kuso...her power was waning...or the wine drug was wearing off...or my brain...had finally decided to show some guts and fight back.

‘His sleeve,’ said a frustrated voice, possibly Juana’s.

Then *let me help you with that* in Japanese.

‘Lexi...’ I blurted out again, looking up just in time to see her body drop to the floor, with the Japanese man’s eyes flashing giallo purple a few inches behind.

‘No...please, she’s-...’

‘Poor girl,’ said the Japanese man, walking up to Lexi’s body and carefully stepping over her waist. ‘Needs a long rest, I think.’

‘What creature are you?’ stammered Juana, loud and way too close to my ear. ‘A djinn?’

‘Ha, one of those little wretches...’

‘Krsnik?’

The Ryu lookalike walked closer to my side of the desk, almost with a swagger, and brushed a finger against the side of my head.

'Your gory insides,' he said, showing me a fairly substantial stream of my own blood, running down the length of his finger.

'I'm bleeding?'

'Her face, Keni. You should punch it. Justified revenge.'

I put my own hand up to the top of my skull and felt moistness. Then pulled it down and confirmed blood.

'Fucking witch-face...' I said, facing Juana, whose hands were claw-like again, raised up in an almost comical monster attack pose. Mexican Boristina Karloff.

Cannibal wretch at a desk of a-

'Quickly, she's gonna pounce.'

'My head...'

'Hit her, Keni. Act. Action. Go.'

I balled a fist, old sparks of playground aggression filtering in, the motel knockout, Syria's hand beneath the pool surface...a head hitting the concrete, Jammer bleeding out, Lexi pulling me closer and tighter and-

'*Kuso*, useless fucking Hamlet clone...'

I blinked, then raised my hands in a feeble, way-too-late act of defence as Juana lunged forward, claws angled to slash down the side of my neck...and, with a brief muffled shriek, landed motionless in my lap.

My brain half expected pain, a reaction to a petty bite on the thigh, but nothing exploded.

Then I moved my leg slightly and she just...rolled off onto the carpet...like a sponge toy.

What?

Dead? That easy?

'How do you manage to get yourself into these situations, Keni?'

I looked up, and then level at the Japanese man now slouched on Juana's swivel chair, the spiral device upside down in his hands. 'Ryu...you're alive.'

His hands shifted, both palms moving the spiral trap up to his face and turning it on.

‘Ryu?’

He laughed, genuine for a second then...something else...something artificial...psychotic even.

‘Ryu, is that-...?’

His hands parted, the spiral-trap dropped, and a different face stared out a familiar face

with those glowing eyes

not yellow like Juana’s but purple

From Beyond purple

Pineal ghoul

but it couldn’t be him, that was

‘Nidra sleep, Keni Cat.’

impossible, void

yet here he was, heroic psychotic, shining and

the murder basement

Lexi

lying there, *Tenebrae* cloaked, unconscious, dead

had to get up and

do something

had to

CHAPTER 40

NOSTALGIA IN A BUCKET

'...after the double strike of Post Office and Dead Bitch On Pluto, an ageing Stahl abandoned LA and moved out permanently to the Ray Chandler lakes, lighting a match on his career comeback just as it was about to fizzle out anyway.

In the years since, there have been sightings, rumours and little else. E-mails are sent and not replied to. Phone calls are unanswered. Agents have even gone so far as to visit his new housse, but are always left sweating on the doorstep, waiting on a disheveled mess that never materialises.

Some people say he's taking a rest. Others claim, more realistically considering the history of H-wood, that he's had a nervous breakdown. Stephanie Clattenburg, his close friend and former director, believes he's just sitting at home, learning French, watching old episodes of Stargate.

It might be true.

After all, actors are rich enough to do that and nothing else, and Stahl did miss his entire childhood.

But, for most of the movie industry, the question still remains: just what the Bōlian hell has happened to Nick Stahl?'

The star that extinguished itself, Ho-Watch online, August, 2035

+++

Things were cold yet comfortable on the ski lift, though Lexi was only covered by her *Tenebrae* t-shirt

and I was in shorts

but it was better than Juana, who was still crawling up the slope

in that yellow jumpsuit

and every time we tried to shout encouragement down at her

Ryu would pop up on the second tier of the lift and tell us to stop cos

‘it’s only real help if you get off and carry her

and neither of you is that good.’

He was right.

so right that as soon as he said it, I was off the lift and on the slope

crawling next to the Mexican psychopath

and when I told her to get on my back, she laughed

held up a spoon and

dug it deep into my calf and

Lexi

Lexi help, she’s

+++

My leg spasmed, connecting with something hard.

Half a second later, a ski-lift smashed on concrete.

I rolled over on my side and, instead of the bottom part of a snow-coated mountain, or a broken Mexican cannibal, I was met with an upwards-facing driveway, lifeless.

‘Wah...’ I managed, sitting up, rubbing the side of my head.

There was a slight sense of grogginess, but no real pain. Or maybe the novelty of the environment was blocking it.

A driveway?

Not a mountain, not a basement, not Stahl laughing Bobby Peru style right in my face.

A driveway.

Empty.

Switching from rubbing to general stretching, I scanned the rest of the alien surroundings. Huge multi-colour garden, ridiculously beautiful [and possible matte painting] lake in the near distance, mauve stucco wall with crease-streaks, oval windows reflecting used-up sunlight. Some kind of bird in the nearby trees making a *waka waka* sound.

I got up, honing in on the windows.

Apparently, I'd fallen asleep on someone's porch - a rich *someone* as the room I was peering into was huge, about two metres between each couch - yet I couldn't remember any part or clip or montage of how I physically got there. The last thing I did recall was the basement, Stahl knocking out Lexi, showing me my own blood, dropping the psychotic Mexican who was about to open up my brain, and beyond that...nothing.

Some kind of journey, or transportation, must've taken place at some point, but...when? In what vehicle? How?

Double-checking the driveway for hidden toy-sized cars, I turned and walked left along the porch and round the corner...to even more porch.

Wow, this place was grand.

And so were the other houses nearby. I could make out some of the roofs sticking up over the tops of the trees, and a few art-deco complexes on the shore opposite.

Was this the place where celebrities lived? Palm Springs?

It was definitely possible.

Celebrities and bankers. Adventurist tech bros. Gangsters. Oligarchs who'd sold off chunks of Kazakhstan in the 20's. VR pioneers. Their agents. Holo-models. Their pimps. Their entour-

Another bird let out a *waka waka*, but was quickly drowned out by a *deeeeeeeen* noise overhead. I looked up just in time to see a hawk-drone skim past, blowing aside some of the leaves. Hmm. Hopefully not the type that dropped payloads on Afghan weddings.

The hawk-drone kept going, the leaves settled, and the *deeeeeeeen* faded out.

Thank the tech gods...

Breathing in crisp lake air, I strolled over and peered into more ground floor windows. There was still no sign of anyone relaxing inside. Perhaps it was early and they were asleep upstairs? My hand instinctively reached for the phone in my jacket pocket, and instantly failed on two levels; no phone, no jacket.

'Kuso...'

No phone meant no way of checking on Lexi. She could still be knocked out on the floor of that psycho's basement, the next brain on the menu. Unless she hadn't actually been hypnotized when she was leading me down to-...

I played back the scene, initially enhancing the degree of flashback-Lexi's zombification, then reducing it.

No, too bleak...she wouldn't do that to me.

I'd slept at her place, in her bed.

She'd clung to my back.

Asked me to stay in Fresno.

Liked Japanese.

Got drugged by the wine...by Juana...and was forced to do all that shit to-

I stopped, looking up as the hawk-drone flew overhead again.

Okay, two options, I thought, walking back round to the front of the house. Knock on the door and see what's what or start walking back to Fresno.

The second one seemed a bit nebulous – I had no idea where I was or how quickly the cops would shoot – so I decided to try my luck with the house owner. Who, based on my last discernible memory, could very well be my old, weird friend...and basement interventionist...Nick Stahl.

Was that good or bad?

I had no idea.

Technically, he did save me from having my brain eaten. And hopefully pulled Lexi out too. But then, he'd also nearly strangled a guy to death on the plane. And somehow projected himself as a Japanese guy...Ryu...tormenting my other, half-buried half...making me believe that he was really-...

No, cut. Veto. Stop.

Do not think about that part, I warned myself as another *waka waka* came from the trees. Or any other part.

Not here.

+++

Either by luck or Stahlian design, the door of the house was ajar.

It was unclear if it had been that way when I walked past originally – I'd been too busy looking at the hawk-drone – but it was definitely that way now.

No noises from inside though.

I looked for a bell around the frame of the door and found a small plaque with *NO LINGERING, NO FANS, NO IRISH* stamped on it. Remembering the lunacy of Nevadan gun commercials online, I instinctively took a step back and checked the surrounding area for the fifth time.

No one on the driveway or the lawn, no binoculars peeking out from the bushes...though that particular area did look a bit suspicious; maybe there was an AH-bot with a sniper rifle in there, aiming at my forehead, or a local pervert with his pants down. Or maybe there was nobody at all.

'Hello,' I shouted, into the house. 'I just woke up on your porch.'

No answer.

'Not sure if you put me there or...'

Still nothing.

'Mr. Stahl?'

A faint *waka waka* from outside.

'Lexi?'

Nothing again.

I took a step back, thinking of the driveway and how long it might take to walk around the lake to the nearest bus stop. Blew out sick air. Then put my hand back on the door and pushed it all the way forward.

A little too forceful it turned out as the edge slammed against the inside wall. Luckily, no one sprang out with a shotgun, so I took it as providence and moved inwards.

Oddly, the kitchen was the first room visible. At the end of the narrow hallway, slightly to the left. I walked in, looking wall to wall to cupboards to side door to patio to football-pitch-sized garden outside. *Ku-fucking-so*. Was this a kitchen or an entire flat? Place looked gigantic. About six times the size of my house back in Liverpool.

And no decorations either. No posters or Monet paintings on the wall. No doodles on the fridge.

Maybe they didn't cook much?

Or eat food.

'Hello?' I tried again, taking a second door out of the kitchen and entering what I assumed was the living room. Or Living Room One of Twelve given the size of the house. Again, it was fairly blank, almost to the level of a showroom.

Maybe that's what it was?

And the agent had left the door open when they'd left.

I searched the floor for piles of clothes or food remains, anything that would tell me someone was actually living there...but not in a zealous, obsessive fan kind of way. I was too tired for that. Or too lazy perhaps.

Finally, I collapsed on the couch and grabbed one of the tube cushions nearby, throwing it up in the air and catching it.

‘Are you here, Mr. Stahl?’ I asked, staring forward at a screen embedded in the wall.

It was large, forty-six inches maybe, but not as large as I'd expected. He was in the movies, surely he'd have a private cinema screen or something. Not something the same size as my one back home.

Maybe this really wasn't his place.

Which meant...I was trespassing...in a stranger's mansion.

There was a noise by the window; sounded like a stone smacking against the glass.

I got up and peeked outside. No one there. I opened up and looked out at the porch to the side. Nothing. Glorious lakeside scenery. That was it.

‘Must be the wind...’ I muttered, picturing a hurricane with dark shades and a newspaper.

Leaving the window, I walked over to the wall TV. There was an old-style DVD player beside it, with a remote and a small collection of DVDs. No sign of a second remote for *GENTE+*.

‘Nostalgia guy...’

Making an abortive whistling sound, I bent down and picked up some of them.

The Fearless Vampire Killers, Klute, Don't Look Now. They all had the same actress on the cover, one I knew...Sharon something...red-head, ex-wife of Polanski, died of a drug overdose in the 90's, the day after April Fool's Day.

Kuso...

Sharon Tate, that was it.

I looked at the back of *The Fearless Vampire Killers*, the shot of Tate in a bathtub, and little Polanski next to her. I could see why the guy would keep this one; Tate was beautiful...back in her day. Though why he didn't just install her character in a VR game like *Nightmare Castle*...on a private server...I had no idea.

Probably a purist, another side of my brain answered.

Yeah, perhaps.

Nick Stahl the sexual ascetic.

Or asexual psychopath.

Or neither.

What else?

I put down the first batch of cases and looked at the ones piled up on top of the DVD player.

Post Office. Dead Bitch On Pluto. Terminator: Autobahn. Sentient Koala Farm.

Wah, they were all his...Nick Stahl's filmns.

I laughed and sat back down on the sofa, keeping hold of *Post Office*. One of the reviews on the back said it played like a cross between *The Big No* and *Midnight Cowboy*, with Stahl as a transcendent acting force playing repressed aggression at the same level as James Caan in *Acrobat Man*.

'Repressed aggression?' I said out loud, remembering the plane incident.

There was another noise, a stone hitting the same window.

I turned, annoyed, mouthing *fucking wind* to no one. Then looked back at the wall screen. A reflection of Japanese Mark stared back, glued to the mirror sofa.

Okay, you're still in someone else's house, I told myself, giving up on the DVDs and walking out to another, larger hallway. Maybe check upstairs quickly and then get out. Find the nearest bus stop, get back to Fresno, make sure Lexi's okay. If she's not been zombified by Juana again.

Something crashed against the ceiling...or the floor above.

I froze.

Then tilted my head, listening for a follow-up.

Nothing.

Was someone up there?

Someone who was neither a property agent nor Nick Stahl?

Wah...Juana.

Had she come too?

Was this her doing?

I looked down at my hands, suddenly feeling quite vulnerable.

Maybe grab a weapon, just in case.

Something with range.

Concurring with my surprise libertarian side, I hurried back into the kitchen and picked up a knife. I looked at the blade, both the tip and the edge, and then put it down. No matter how threatened I felt, I'd never be able to stab someone. It was too close, too intimate.

Spotting a rolling pin by the sink, I grabbed it and tapped the end lightly against my arm. It didn't hurt, obviously, but I knew it would break something if swung hard enough.

'Right, upstairs...'

I headed back through the living room, rolling pin primed and ready, and out into a clearing with a curved staircase running up god knows which wall outside.

Making my way slowly up, I killed nerves by examining the paintings pinned up at the side. They were spaced out evenly, one every metre or so, each one possessing a variation on the same image: a huge structure that looked like a futuristic version of Laputa floating in the sky, the edges glowing with some kind of purple fire. The only real difference between each painting was the angle of the structure.

Did the house owner like science fiction then? Or Steampunk?

Or maybe it was his own art?

I glanced at the brushwork on the last painting and quickly decided I didn't have a clue what I was looking for - I was a writer, not a painter - so I left the artwork and concentrated on the stairs again.

+++

On the first floor, I stood with rolling pin in both hands, looking at the doors ahead.

Heartbeat relatively steady, paranoia tempered. In fact, the only thing really worrying me was the thought of finding nothing at all, as then I'd be dealing with a poltergeist.

Actually, that wasn't true.

Juana would've been pretty terrifying. Her and that spoon...the creepy spiral trap...the calmness...

I blinked, de-blurring the corridor.

Seven doors.

No Mexican cannibal.

Go.

Switching the rolling pin to my striking hand, I took a quick breath and, without *that* voice, pushed open the first door on the left.

'Fantastic...' I muttered, looking into a featureless void.

Just like the living room and the kitchen, there was nothing on the walls. In fact, there was nothing anywhere. Apart from an incongruous plastic desk in the corner...on which there was no paper, no pens and no casino blueprints.

'It's a fucking holiday home,' I told the rolling pin, already backed out and moving on to the next door, nerves now laid out on the beach with a lilac cocktail and onsen holo-model. 'Nothing to be scared of here.'

Which was pretty accurate as the next room along was empty too.

Completely without decoration.

As was the one beyond that.

And the one beyond that.

The fifth room had a single bed...with no sheets, pillows or duvet.

The sixth went back to being void-empty, which was a little unnerving. Or maybe my bravado was wearing off.

‘Jesus Template Fuck...’

I came back out, fake swinging the rolling pin at nitrogen particles and poltergeist muons and whatever else was in the corridor air.

Okay.

One more door left.

Had to be the one that the crashing sound had come-...

Right on cue, another noise, this time a steady knocking pattern.

Walking up to the final door, I pressed the rolling pin against the wood and pushed.

Thank fuck was the first thing that hit me.

Followed by *what the fuck* as I took in the décor. Occult black walls, bed with black sheets, dirty white blanket bunched up in a mess on the floor...drawn curtains blocking out the sun, giving a definite serial killer vampire pervert vibe.

Then there were the scribblings on the wall, in kiddie red crayon.

‘No point no point no point no point no point no point no point no point no point no point no point no point no point no point no point NO POINT NO POINT NO POINT POINT GA NAI.’

I read it a few times, checking for differences in spelling, and almost forgot about the knocking sound completely until it started up again.

Kuso.

It seemed to be coming from the corner of the room.

‘Okay, hero-man...’

I took a few steps forward, circling the bed, the rolling pin raised an inch above my shoulder.

There was a closet, with three door panels...and someone knocking from inside of it.

‘Hello?’

More knocking.

'Mr. Stahl...'

More knocking.

'Lexi?'

More knocking.

I moved closer, thankful that the rolling pin was made of wood as otherwise it'd be slipping out of my hand.

'Nick?'

The knocking stopped.

Kuso...

Conjuring up a few pics of peace signs and *Vulcan Jesus* shirts inside my head, I reached forward with one hand and pulled open the door.

'Fuck...'

As predicted, it was a closet.

With two people inside.

One, a very tired-looking Juana, bound and gagged, both arms absorbed into the shadowed space behind her back.

The other...Nick Stahl...slumped naked in a huge tub of ice, the skin on his torso, and his face, bluer than Lavinia the Goddess of Death.

'Varo-esque, desu ne?'

I gave out an *hmm* sound as a reflex...*yes, Varo, definitely...* then spun fast when I realized it was an actual voice projected from somewhere behind.

Too late, too slow, too late, too slow, too late, too-

Whoever had put Juana and Stahl in there already had the jump on me, but I raised the rolling pin anyway, aiming at the rough outline of the only figure I could see, a figure that couldn't be what I thought it was cos that guy was in the ice tub, blue as Lavinia GoD, not standing opposite, grinning like a pub magician.

'Woah, dude,' the Stahl clone said, catching my rolling pin with his left hand.

'You're-...'

‘Swinging at me, in my own fucking house.’

I didn’t have anything beyond *you’re*, so I released my share of the rolling pin and just stared...into the two swirling blotches of purple that should’ve been eyes...but were actually something very different...something distant...alien.

‘Lucky for you, I’m the forgiving type. Ne?’

CHAPTER 41



Twenty-four years ago, in a Ljubljana barr

'So fucking tired of all this cowshit, comrade. Nobody listens to philosophers anymore. Nobody cares about cultural theory or Hegel or Bōl or Kapok or anything.

Why do we bother? I could've been an architect. Could've redesigned this whole pocket city, but no, no, I chose the insanity path. Cultural theory. Who beyond Allah has time for that? Ah, I know, I know, English graduates, reams of them. Infinite chutes pumping them straight out into my seminars. Honest talk, comrade, you have no idea how small the philosophy circle truly is...no idea how wankish it is. How *chok*.

Sorry, Cantonese word, my fault.'

The comrade took a sip of his cranberry juice and told Žižek not to worry, there were always ways to become relevant.

'Yes, I know. I could go on TV, say something provocative. Get my dick out and-...'

'No, not that.'

'What then?'

The comrade smiled. 'Movies.'

'Huh? Make movies?'

'No, talk about them. Write about them. The proles watch movies, you analyse them through a theoretical lens, there's your relevance.'

Žižek stroked his chin and nodded.

'Also,' added the comrade, staring at Žižek's chin. 'Grow a beard. A giant one.'

'Hmm.'

'And spit more.'

'Eh?'

+

One year later, after taking a stab at *Die Hard* and the comfort of crisis, Žižek broke out of the small [wankish] circle of philosophy and became an international luminary.

In the same barr, with a bear-like beard, he told his old comrade he was a genius.

'It was a simple idea, really,' replied the comrade, stirring his cranberry juice. 'I'm just glad I could help.'

'No, not you...me. It was my idea if you recall.'

'Fairly certain it wasn't.'

'What, do you not remember? You said, movie reviews are interesting, then I said, ja, why don't I analyse movies? And then you said, ja, it could be a good idea.'

'I remember it quite differently.'

'Ja, incorrectly.'

'No, I'm pretty sure I'm right.'

'Bullshit, it was my idea.'

'Slavoj...'

'Mine, mine, mine, mine...times infinity. Try to claim it publicly and I'll crucify you. I don't want to, that would be a Leninist move, but I will if you push me.'

The comrade stared at Žižek for forty seconds straight, with oddly lilac eyes, then got up, left his flak jacket on the stool and walked out into the winter night without saying another word.

+

Two days later, Žižek was visited in a dream by a cheap-looking magician with blinding purple eyes.

'Who are you? What do you want?'

'You know who I am.'

Žižek squinted, struggling with the purple glare. 'Marty McFly?'

'No.'

'Mandrake?'

'No.'

'Q?'

'Enough.'

The magician told him he was a demon and it was his mission to destroy the world and only cultural theory could stop him.

'Wait, what? Who's a demon?'

'I am,' said the magician/demon.

'And you want to destroy the world...'

'No. I am destroying the world, day by day. It's started already, can't you see?'

'It has?'

'Of course it has.'

Žižek did an *abbb* face. 'Capitalism.'

The magician nodded.

'But...why are you telling me this?'

'Simple. I need an adversary, someone to give my destruction meaning. That's you, by the way.'

'How? I can't fight...'

'Of course you can.'

'No, really. I've never even punched a child.'

'You can hold a knife, can't you?'

Žižek looked at his hand and saw a long green dagger.

'Good. Now what you must do...your mission...is to find me and stab me through the heart with that blade. There is only one of me, one kill, one victory, but I warn you I am very difficult to find. I do not travel by conventional means. You will not find me in airports or ferry terminals.'

'Then where?'

'In the void-realm of cabinets.'

'Cabinets?'

'You repeat well. Yes, cabinets. Just like Doctor Caligari.'

'How will I know which cabinet is yours?'

'You won't.'

'Then how...'

'You must check them all. Every city you visit, every convention and symposium you attend, check all nearby cabinets. Got it?'

Žižek looked at the green knife and nodded.

'It might take you a while...possibly your whole life. Is that acceptable?'

'It is my mission. I will do what I must.'

'Good, good. See you then, nemesis.'

'Ja, goodbye...demon.'

The demon/magician vanished and a few seconds later a small wisp of smoke appeared. Žižek put the green knife under his pillow and went back to sleep, ecstatic that he'd found such a Nietzschean sense of purpose.

Then realised he was already asleep and woke up.

His hand dived quickly under the pillow, desperate to feel metal.

The green knife...

He pulled it out and there it was.

Thank Gods.

[Conceptually]

+

Five years later, Žižek sat in a train station, reviewing his quest notes:

Zagreb symposium for chok professors, 2006 - 18 cabinets checked, no demon.

Munich symposium on Hegel and how right he was - 212 cabinets checked, no demon

Edinburgh symposium on sex and death in giallo - 54 cabinets checked, no demon. Stabbed a janitor by mistake while checking cabinet no. 12, said sorry and ran away, seemed to get away with it.

He paused, looking up at a nearby billboard, stroking the longest tip of his beard.

Perhaps the demon does not want me in jail?

Perhaps...I'm protected?

+

At the Las Vegas Star Trek convention, Nick Stahl leaned against the wall of the building forty floors up in the air and watched his old friend Žižek tiptoe towards the cabinet in Michael Dorn's dressing room.

It had stopped being really funny a while ago, but it was still enough to raise a smirk.

Another ten, twelve years and poor Žižek would be as mad as a deck chair.

Maybe then he'd forgive him.

Or maybe not.

+++

Back at Lake Arrowhead...

Nick Stahl...or whoever it really was...dipped his head in a continual, slightly off-kilter loop, apparently waiting for me to say something.

When I didn't, he breathed out in clear disappointment and said, simply, 'kitchen.'

'Who are you?' I asked, finally, as I trailed him back downstairs, past all the Laputa pics.

'Predictable, Keni.'

'Okay. Why is the other Nick Stahl in your closet? In a bucket, with blue skin? And Juana...what is she doing-...'

'Ah, don't go pinball, dude. Kitchen first, answers later.'

He clamped a hand on my shoulder and shone those mystical purple eyes at me and that, coupled with the Kryptonian death grip, was enough to shut me up.

+++

The kitchen was just about as desolate as it had been ten minutes earlier.

Zero posters to look at, and no stools to sit on so I just leaned against the table-island surface, while Stahl did circles around me, a litre carton of cranberry juice in his hand.

'Can't believe you just walked in here,' he said, ignoring the surplus juice dribbling down his chin. 'You know most of my neighbours are armed, right?'

'Took a chance, I guess...'

'Yeah, huge one. Arquette would've shot you on sight. Most of the others too. Lucky for you, I'm a more rational kind of guy.'

I looked at my own glass, only about one tenth of it containing juice.

'A savior even. If we're talking about that whole video caffè, Mexican cannibal situation. And the recuperation centre that is my lakeside home.' He put the

juice down and went back to the fridge, pulling out another carton. ‘Dude, wait to you see some of the spots around here. The Ray Chandler stuff, the other homes, the boat jump...’

‘I’d like to know what’s going on first,’ I said, as soft as I could make it.

‘About what?’

‘This, what happened before, the stuff upstairs.’

‘That’s pretty vague.’

‘Your-...the other you, in the ice bucket...Juana...’

He put the carton to his lips and sucked down the juice, dribbling again. When he was done, he threw it at the bin [and missed] then came next to the table surface and, for some reason, studied my forehead.

‘I know you have...some abilities,’ I continued, lifting one hand up as a kind of half-assed surrender flag, ‘and that you rescued me from the basement. I appreciate that.’

‘Appreciate?’

‘Really appreciate. I mean, I owe you my life, obviously, but...’

‘Ah, this is venturing into awkward territory. In my own fucking kitchen. Okay, how about this? I give you one question, and that’s it.’

‘Only one?’

‘An allowance, not an offer.’

I picked up my glass and took the tiniest sip of juice...and almost choked. It was unbelievably sour, as if it’d been in the fridge for years.

‘One minute deadline too. Which gives you ten more seconds to spit something out.’

I put the glass down and looked around the kitchen, then around the outline of Stahl’s barely creased face. I’d already asked him what he was and he’d evaded...would it be a bad idea to ask the same thing again?

‘Two seconds...one...’

‘What are you?’ I shot out, along with some spit.

He smiled, eyes flashing purple. 'Alien, of course.'

'*Kuso*. Seriously? An alien?'

'Yes.'

'Wah...from Space?'

'That sounds like a second question.'

'No...I mean, space as in-...where are you from? Why are you here? Is this your real face...or form?'

'Third, fourth, fifth question. This could quickly spiral out of control.'

'Sorry, it's just-...'

'Enough rambling. I need to get out of this kitchen, it's depressing. The house too. Let's go for a drive around the lake, see if we can catch some of the boat jumps.'

His eyes were increasing their glare factor so I looked at my glass full of expired juice instead. He was an alien. According to himself. His own promotion. But no...he was, I'd seen it with my own eyes. The purple glow, the change from Ryu to Nick Stahl to god knows what else. The way he'd strangled that guy on the plane, the real Nick Stahl upstairs in a bucket, ice-cold, blue skin, knocking out Juana without touching her at all.

Wait...Lexi...

I looked up, jumping back a bit when I saw him fixed on my forehead again with that weird, purple hypno-vision.

'She's back home,' he said, looking down at my glass.

'In the basement? You left her there?'

'No, dude...I'm not an animal. I used my own time and effort to carry her upstairs, then put her carefully down on the couch. I even put a movie on for her. *Re-Animator 2*, if I remember correctly.'

'She's not hurt?'

'Might have a bit of a headache when she wakes up, but the rest of her, no problem. Why? Do you miss her?'

I opened my mouth, but had no idea what words to send out.

‘It’s okay, Keni, you fuck someone a few times, you develop something. Not a bond, but something.’

‘How did you-...’

‘And you can always go back there, after our little lake tour. Move in with her, buttress the cave walls, run around that little VR castle, finger each other in the dungeons. Say you’ll get round to the writing, but you never really do. And Sadia...Sadia who? Little elf’s gone already. Flitted in and cruised out, with her shitty teen poetry. Dude, now I’m rambling. Must be the expired juice. Yeah, let’s head out. Forget Lexi, she’s gone, forget Sadia, she’s fucking some other guy in Portland. Focus on our spectacular, about-to-start-any-minute-now lake tour.’

He clapped his hands together as a full stop, but it didn’t erase my question.

‘How did you know about me and Lexi?’ I asked again.

‘Ah, fucking pedant...’

‘You were watching?’

‘Telepathy, you perv. Your mind’s like an open crayon book. I know you fucked a girl in LA too, and tried to fuck another one in the...’ His line faded out, as did the purple in his eyes. ‘Hmm. Nice evasion.’

‘You mean you can-...you’re actually reading my thoughts, right now?’

He blinked, almost like he was rebooting.

‘Nick?’

Then switched back on again.

‘Car’s out in the driveway. Lake time.’

+++

For some reason, the alien posing as Nick Stahl had a Lego car.

Or that’s what it looked like.

Barely enough to fit in the driver, let alone a passenger, and with both of us not having Lego-sized legs, it was a real struggle to get comfortable.

'Raymond Chandler lake, just to the right there,' Nick said, pointing his arm across my body and out the passenger side window. 'VR is better in this case, obviously, but they did put in a fake corpse of the woman to give it some verisimilitude. It's pretty cool, actually, a few times every hour, she'll bob up to the surface and they'll have a fish swim out of her mouth...'

'Is it from a movie?'

'Huh? You don't know Ray Chandler? *Lady in the Lake*?'

'I've heard of the woman with the sword, and King Arthur.'

'Dude...you call yourself a writer?'

'I didn't say that.'

'*Lady in the Lake* is one of the greatest books ever written. And Ray Chandler, serious, if you wanna know how to write description, or voice, read that guy. But don't copy, you might end up with *Neuromancer* or *Snow Crash*...try-hard, pastiche shit.'

'Okay.'

'Okay? That's not a very committed answer.'

'To be honest, I haven't thought much about writing recently.'

'Cos of the girl?'

'No.'

'Residue depression from your previous work?'

I turned my head to him, careful not to move forward too much and inadvertently headbutt him. *I thought you were telepathic* came to mind, but was probably too caustic, so I settled for a quiet 'no' instead.

'Ah, I see. Is it cos I'm an alien?'

'No.'

He made a tutting sound, and enjoyed it so much he made two more, judging me through the windscreen mirror.

‘Well, it wasn’t,’ I offered, slouching back in the seat and inevitably clipping my knees against the dashboard. ‘It might be now.’

‘That’s better.’

‘Maybe if I knew a bit more about you...’

‘No digging, Keni.’

‘I mean, it could help me get comfortable with things. And then I could start writing something.’

Nick laughed and steered us right, onto a dirt track. He didn’t say anything for a while, just looked at the trees ahead, until finally they parted on both sides and the track ended next to quite a serene, picturesque lake.

‘This one isn’t so well known...’ he said, getting out of the car, perching himself on the bonnet. As soon as he did, the front of the car dipped by about five inches.

For the sake of my legs, I got out and sat next to him. Followed his outstretched finger across the lake.

‘See that cabin. Bunch of Reagan fanatics holed up over there, back in the 80’s. Thought they were getting covert signals from his TV speeches, directives to kidnap sexy, young, black women from Compton and turn them into blondes.’

‘Err...’

‘FBI found out about it and let it ride for a while, curious as to how it would turn out. But then some of the lower level agents found out, slightly more moral types, and they were forced to deal with it. Charged in and found two black women, naked, blonde hair all over...and the Reagan nuts dead from blood loss after chopping their own dicks off. I think one guy escaped with all the cash, and dick intact, but I’m not sure.’

‘That’s real?’

‘You can play it on the village VR if you don’t believe me. They’ve got the tame version and the X-rated one where you play the Reagan fans. Maybe an S&M rip from the black girl viewpoint too.’

'I think I'll stick to *Nightmare Castle*.'

'Coward.'

+++

After looking at the lake [and the pin-sized cabin at the far end where all the bizarre stuff took place] a little longer, we got back in the car and continued the tour.

Nick telling me about all the celebrities who lived in the area, and me subtly trying to redirect each little anecdote back onto the alien question.

Finally, I wore him down to such a level that he stopped the car outside the gate of Breckin Meyer's house and gave me a choice: boat jumps or alien talk.

'Alien talk,' I replied quickly.

'Instead of boat jumps?'

'Yes. Please.'

He emptied his lungs with a drawn out trail and stared off at the *SEXY VISITORS WELCOME* sign pinned up outside Meyer's front gate.

'You don't have to tell me that much...' I said, my hand hovering halfway over to his shoulder, but not having the guts to pat.

'Don't have to tell you anything.'

'Yeah, of course. I know that.'

'But in the interest of future shorthand...' He patted the wheel and swerved back onto the road. 'Lunch and *ME* talk. Until I get bored.'

'Lunch?'

+++

The lakeside diner called *A DINER* was on the *bustling* side of Lake Arrowhead and, when we walked in, completely deserted except for the waitress, the chef and a white-haired guy reading a newspaper four days old.

Actually, I couldn't see the chef, but I assumed there was one cos chopping noises were coming from the kitchen.

And foreign music, possibly fado.

Nick sat us down in the corner booth, ordering two tuna surprises and four black coffees without asking me anything. Then stretched back in his seat and announced that the old guy reading the paper was, in fact, Malachai from *Children of the Corn*.

'Sorry?'

'Lives a few doors down from me. Comes in here at least five times a week, then heads across the road to the VR plaza. Says he's reliving the classical Lake Arrowhead era, communing with dead friends, but really he's just using it to bareback Malina Weissman. She lives here too, out on the east shore. Don't know why she allowed her real profile to be used on the VR server, but it's in there. My guy too, actually. Blue-skinned devil, Nick Stahl. Must be some kind of vicarious desperation factor, faded actors trying to...'

I nodded and listened on as he segued into the limits of the X-rated VR servers compared to real life depravity, and then how the lake wasn't that good in the 90's anyway, how the restoration of the Ray Chandler aesthetic in 2028 was the thing that saved the place, and that was only cos not enough people cared about Chandler novels to bother turning it into a tourist mud swamp.

'Just the right level of attention and entropy...probably by accident, but still...hell of a place to live. Ah, quadruple coffee, finally.'

The waitress put all four cups down with a polite, 'there you go, Mr. Stahl,' paused a second as if he would respond, then turned and walked with a slight curve back to the counter. As she went, the old guy who had apparently starred in *Children Of The Corn* at some point, leaned over and made slurping noises at her ass.

'Everyone seems to know you here,' I said, taking some of what I assumed was my coffee.

'Not me.'

'I mean that waitress, she just-...'

'Nope. That was the other Nick, during one of his red phases.' He paused, picking up one cup and downing it. Then pulled over the other and blew at the steam. 'He kept her locked up at his house for over a month. Made her dress up like Claire Danes one day, told her to stop looking like her the next. Then escorted the poor lovestruck idiot to the road outside his driveway and locked the gate.'

'That's pretty messed up.'

'Ah, just the usual generic human shit. Tedious as fuck. Let's move on to the alien talk, get it over with.'

'Err...okay. What should I ask first?'

'Not that.'

I laughed, nervously, and took more of my coffee. 'Okay, something more specific. Which planet are you from?'

'A big one,' he answered, taking the tiniest sip from his second cup.

'Is it outside this solar system or...'

'Obviously.'

'It is outside?'

He rubbed his eye, possibly an affectation of tiredness.

'So you've come from outside it, to here?'

'No.'

'You've come from inside it?'

Nick grabbed the sugar shaker and added almost half of it to his coffee, then put his elbows on the table and stared at me. 'Let's skip the questions...way too convoluted. Besides, you're stuck on the basics, inside the solar system, outside it. What we need to be establishing is the true size of things.'

'I don't understand.'

'For example. The universe is a very big, very empty place.'

'Err...'

'Don't give that face, dude. I know you think you know, but you don't, not the way I do. See, your maps are always trying to squeeze everything onto one page, eight planets lined up in a straight line, but that's bullshit, the universe doesn't work that way. It is huge and unrelenting and...beyond monkey brain comprehension.'

I nodded, a video of the true size of the universe that I'd watched a few months back paused on my internal projection screen.

'Serious, even your own solar system. You ask me if I've been outside of it as if it's just a little place at the end of the road.'

'I didn't mean it like-...'

He put a finger to his lips. The waitress came over with two tuna surprises and put both down in front of Nick. Then asked if we needed anything else.

Nick didn't look at her, so I said, no, we were fine, and pulled one of the plates over to my side.

Performing the clear chore of a smile, the waitress wiped the edge of the table then bent down to pick something up off the floor. I couldn't be sure but it looked like her hand was reaching over to Nick's thigh.

Then it wasn't.

She was back up and walking off towards the counter.

'That was weird,' I said, pulling one of the plates over to my side.

'Scale and distances,' Nick continued, sliding the salt and pepper pots over. 'This salt pot is Earth, the pepper, Mars. You wanna go from one to the other, that's practically next door. It takes you humans...what, a year to get there? Takes me about two seconds.'

'Two seconds...'

'But that's only cos I've been there before. See, if I know a place, I can set up shortcuts so I don't need to actively go there. Nah, don't even ask, dude, it's way above your level.'

I lowered my hand, surprised I'd raised it in the first place.

'If there's no shortcut, if I go in my own vessel then...six hours, maybe seven...I'm not sure the exact number cos, honestly, I haven't done it for a long time. I only really go up there to drift nowadays...the last few decades or so.' He paused, eating some of the tuna surprise while also staring at the one on my plate. 'The point is...Mars isn't that far. Jupiter isn't that far. None of the planets are...Makemake might take a week or two, its orbit is pretty weird, but mostly it's just like you humans on your airplanes.'

I drank some coffee and looked at the dark green sauce smeared on the side of my plate. 'Think I get it.'

'I doubt it, dude.'

'You're an alien, you can do some things humans can't...'

'Some?'

'...travel places we can't reach. With better technology. Though I'm still not sure where you actually come from...which planet, I mean.'

He glared at me, his eyes turning that classical shade of lilac.

'Wah...your eyes...they're purple again.'

'So?'

'Is that normal?'

'Normal...'

'For your kind, I mean?'

'My kind...'

He ripped off a chunk of tuna with his bare hand and looked out the window. Was he annoyed? Or just tired of talking to an ant? I assumed it was at least one of the two, so I backed off a little, focusing on the VR promo screen on the wall nearby. They were playing the ad for the Lakeside VR game, or *experience* as the credits called it. *Play by the lake. Mingle with celebrities in their homes. Visit the darker side of the human soul. In the Category IV version, do so much more.*

When it was over, they played it again. And again. Five times in a row before *Pluto 2280* finally elbowed its way in.

'Your favourite game...' said Stahl, finishing off the last bit of tuna.

'Mine?'

'Back in Japan...you were very taken by it.'

I watched the ad play its last few scenes and had a sudden rush of phantom bile come up my throat as a female astronaut sat up with her bare back turned, asking the audience if they wanted to go again.

'Less said about the science the better though. I mean, dude, those little aliens running around...Martokras. And the idea that the Oort Cloud is just a few hours away from Pluto, at that made-up speed measurement you monkeys use.'

'They didn't wear helmets.'

'I mean, dude, even if you hit a lottery patch of stretched space, it'd still take you the best part of half a year. Assuming you've got enough shielding to get past the heliosphere, which you don't...'

'Stretched what?'

'...in fact, your scientists don't even have a concept of it yet. Stretched space, dude. It's like subspace from that Trek show. Small pockets of it everywhere, speeding you up, redirecting you. Yeah, technically it makes the distance longer, makes things further away, but really, it speeds you up cos it's not really stretched the same way you-...'

He paused, distracted by the waitress as she came back over and asked if everything was okay.

'Tuna's nice,' I said, hoping she wouldn't notice that I'd only had one bite.

'And you Mr. Stahl?'

'Yes, very good.'

'More coffee?' she asked, tilting the jug over his barely touched second cup.

'Obviously not.'

She flinched, keeping the coffee pot at an angle for a moment before saying 'okay' and turning back towards the counter. Two steps gone and she was yanked back by the sleeve, Stahl leaning in close to her ear and saying, in a whisper that

wasn't actually a whisper at all, next time she should pour the coffee over his miserable junkie head.

She shrugged him off and stepped back, the coffee pot hanging loose in her hand...so loose that I moved forward and steadied it for her.

'He's not feeling well today,' I explained, but it didn't land as she was glued to his purple eyes...mouthing words without any sound...

'Nick...?' I said softly, waving my hand vaguely near his face.

It didn't work the first time, but the second time it got through as the flare from his pupils dimmed and his body seated itself back down. Prepping another apology, I turned to the side of the table and let out a genuine *wah* as the waitress was already back at the counter, swiping at her phone as if nothing had happened.

'How did you do that?' I asked, retaking my seat. 'She was here and then...she was over there. Instantly.'

'Magic.'

'The purple in your eyes...is that how you do it?'

'Previous topic, please.'

I paused, looking at the waitress again. Then back at Nick. Then at the waitress again. Then at the shrunken dots of purple at the centre of his eyes.

'Your stretched space question would be a good place to start,' he said, stirring more sugar into his coffee.

'Err...okay.'

'And stop saying *err*, it's annoying.'

'Sorry. I'm just trying to keep up.'

'Question.'

I nodded, rotating my coffee cup with zero thought of actually drinking any. Why would I? It wasn't barking at me, making costumed threats. Nick Stahl the alien was. 'Is it-...are there pockets of stretched space between solar systems too?'

'That's basically what I just said.'

'So...you can go back to your planet...using that method?'

Breathing out with an attached *fucking jesus*, he scanned his plate for remaining chunks of tuna. When he couldn't see any, he switched to mine, picking up some of the fries which I hadn't even realized were hidden underneath.

'Should I ask a different question?'

He chewed my own food at me, his eyes doing the lilac party trick yet again.

'Okay...'

I picked up my coffee and drank, looking around.

The VR promo screen was still on the same loop, so I tried the old guy at the counter. He was stroking his thigh, talking to the waitress. Poor woman. She probably had to put up with this shit every day. Like Lexi and that guy who'd asked her out to *GRAPE FEST*, then sulked when she'd said no.

I looked outside and projected an image of her...my zombie girlfriend...leading a guy into the back of a car. Surprisingly not in her *Tenebrae* t-shirt, but a dark blue sports vest, and...wait a second...

My eyes closed and opened again, followed by several auxiliary blinks.

No, it wasn't an image. She was there, Lexi...actually, physically there in the parking lot. And it was the guy leading her into the car, not-...*kusso*. What was this? A lookalike? Hallucination?

I pushed off the seat and almost tripped onto the floor, telling Nick that Lexi might be out there, with a guy, and it looked she was moving funny, limping, could be some kind of trouble.

'Dude, what are you jabbering about?'

'Come on...'

I didn't bother waiting for him, I just stumbled out of the diner and onto the gravel as it spat up little pieces of grit at my shins, the car accelerating out onto the main road.

'Lexi...' I shouted, pinning my eyes to the shadow of the back of her head in the car window.

No movement.

At all.

Like she was drugged.

Or tired.

If it was even her.

Fuck.

Was it?

My eyes...brain...

Hallucinating?

The whole thing?

‘Well, that was about the fastest I’ve ever seen a monkey move,’ Nick said, coming up behind me, rubbing his hands with Vlad-like glee. ‘Don’t worry, I took care of the bill. You can pay for the next meal.’

‘Lexi...here...I think she just got in that car.’

‘Yeah, I saw that.’

‘But...it can’t be her cos you said she was back home, in Fresno. Right?’

‘Well, that’s the direction she was headed last I saw her.’

‘What?’

‘I think you mean *when*. About five minutes before you woke up.’

‘She was...in your house?’

‘Briefly. Until she freaked out and ran.’

My hand flipped into fist mode and in some other dimension I was already on top of the alien wretch, caving in his face, but in this one...

‘It really was her then,’ I said, filtering out most of the aggression, looking back out at the main road.

‘Seems like it.’

‘Fuck...she really might be in trouble.’

‘Sure. Tangentially.’

‘Tangent? What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘It means...Keni-cat...that I have nothing but your best interests at heart.’
Nick walked over to his car and opened the driver’s door, then turned back with the grin of an insurance agent. ‘So? Are we pursuing or not?’



If I'd been expecting a high-speed chase around the loop road of Lake Arrowhead [and half of me had], then I was quickly put in check. Not only did Nick's Lego car lack mass and horsepower, but the engine seemed to be on the verge of exploding whenever it crept over seventy. And the road itself was practically deserted. Just the occasional car going the other way, towards the town centre, and one vacant-looking elderly man watching his dog take a shit beside a *Pluto 2280* promo.

'They're not even in sight,' I moaned, essentially planting my face against the windscreen. 'Can't you go any faster?'

'Speed limit's fifty, dude.'

'So? It's already on sixty-five, and they're miles ahead of us. They must be...unless they turned off on one of these side roads.'

'Impossible.'

'Or changed to another car. Or bike. Or speedboat.'

'Even more impossible.'

'Okay, maybe the last two...but there's been about twenty side roads already, they could've easily taken one of them.'

Nick made spluttering sounds, possibly laughter.

‘What, they couldn’t?’

‘Come on, this is my neighbourhood, dude. I know this place like the back of a monkey hand. All these little turn offs you’re seeing, they lead to one single house, sometimes a grove...and all the ones we’ve passed so far have been pretty good friends of mine. Definitely not the types to pick up a random girl from outside the local VR plaza.’

‘You know all of them, from all those side roads?’

‘Names *and* character flaws. See, that lane we just passed, part of Morris Chestnut’s estate. This one up ahead, that goes to Karen Fukuhara’s house. Ah, she’s quite funny, one of my favourites actually. See, there’s this huge artificial lake in her garden, all these robotic piranhas swimming around...and every time she has new guests round, she’ll wobble near the edge of the lake, act panicked and, boom, just drop in there. Then, when she’s under, she’ll send these cheap, little blood packets back up to the surface, pricking them so they leak out. If she’s feeling really dark, she’ll skip her own drop and push a guest in instead. Did it to me once, right after I said her nose looked weird.’

‘Can we focus on the other car?’

‘Obviously, she didn’t know who I was...so I fucked with her back. Stayed at the bottom of the lake for twenty minutes before finally resurfacing. Stuck some of the robot piranhas on my neck too. Wah, should’ve seen the look on her face. Dopey witch thought she’d just murdered the actual Nick Stahl.’

‘The car...please.’

‘Dude, calm your tits. We’re getting there.’

‘When? We can’t even see them.’

‘Just a few more minutes.’

‘Could be anywhere by now...if he’s going faster than us...which he must be. *Kuso*, Lexi. What the fuck was she thinking? Getting in the car with a random guy. She better be okay.’

Nick whistled and slapped a hand on my thigh, sparking an instinctive, ‘what?’

‘Hate to be an optimist, but maybe she just hooked up with the guy?’

‘Optimist?’

‘Met him in town, felt drawn to his voice or face or whatever it is you monkeys see in each other...then decided to go back to his place and fuck.’

‘No. Lexi wouldn’t do that. Not her style.’

‘She did it with you.’

‘That was after three days...’ I paused, bringing back memory blocks that seemed blurry almost as soon as I pressed *review*. ‘Maybe more than three. And in her home city.’

‘Maybe she really likes this guy.’

‘No, her face, eyes, it wasn’t-...whole thing didn’t look normal, she didn’t-...it was not reciprocated.’

‘Reciprocated...nice word.’

‘The guy probably put something in her drink and...just enough that she could still walk, make it to his car. *Kuso*, they could’ve turned off anywhere, any of these forest trails...what are we gonna do?’

The car braked suddenly, sending my face slamming into the windscreen.

‘Here,’ said Stahl, looking left at a familiar dirt track.

‘Jesus, you could’ve warned me.’

‘Seatbelt, dude. Not my fault.’

I looked down at the belt clip, clipping my tongue as I remembered trying to plug it in when I first sat down, and how stubborn it was. Ah, possibly still my fault. And irrelevant, as this piece of shit micro machine wasn’t capable of *throw me clean through the windscreen* speed.

Nick turned the wheel to face the track ahead and then stopped again.

‘Isn’t this the same one we-...’ I started, recognizing the *REAGAN CULT CABIN* sign pinned to a nearby tree.

‘They were here about ten minutes ago,’ Nick said, pointing at the dirt on the track.

'You're sure?'

'One of my abilities.'

'What, reading tracks?'

'No, visualizing trails. I touch your leg, you've touched Lexi before, this gives me access to the sub-atomic-...to the base connection of the...' He breathed out, pointing at the track again. 'They're down there.'

'Okay, then we follow.'

'Now?'

'Of course, she might be in trouble. More than might if they're in that weird fucking cabin.'

'You don't want to check out the lady in the lake first? It's pretty fun, when the fish swims out...'

I leaned over and pushed his knee down, trying to make him accelerate. 'Go, drive.'

The car lurched forward.

'Hey, that's my leg...'

'She really might be in trouble. Please.'

'Okay, dude. I'm driving. But only cos there was a please in there.'

He resumed control of his own leg and took us through the trees, extremely slowly, at some points gesturing towards a flower to the side and using phrases like *Phylogenetic Taxonomy*, while I punched the dashboard and told him to speed up.

'You really like her that much?' he asked, stopping the car by the same lake we'd visited an hour earlier, whistling at the red car from outside the diner parked just a few yards ahead.

'That's it, same car. They must be in that cabin.'

'I mean, is she worth all this effort? Or do you just want to fuck her again?'

'Come on, out, let's go.'

I opened the car door and honed in on the cabin stood nonchalantly at the other side of the lake. It wasn't that far, and there were hiking tracks running right

and left...but it wasn't clear which one was faster as both were obscured by trees in certain places.

'Objectively speaking, you do tend to lead with your dick. And Lexi is quite an attractive monkey to be fair. Sorry...human. But then, you don't actually know her, do you? Just fucked her after three days. On a Mexican demon's couch no less.'

'Are you coming or not?'

'And before that there was the blonde Plath wannabe. Came all the way out here to fuck that one and then...pah...when you found out she'd gone already, in the arms of a very dangerous man...'

I glanced back, four steps along the path to the right.

'Thought that might get your attention. Yeah, carrying Juana back to my house gave me the trace of her...too decayed to be really accurate, but I could see who she was with. Lot of darkness in that guy. Don't know how long your sweet Sadia's gonna keep it at bay, especially if she won't fuck him. Very perilous situation. Maybe we should go and rescue her instead?'

I balled my fist as he left the car and strolled up to me.

'Or is her cunt too nebulous now?'

'*Kuso...*'

'Abstract cunt poked by abstract psychopath, in some state you've probably never heard of.'

'You're disgusting.'

Nick stopped next to me, clamping a hand on my shoulder. 'Yeah, you're right. Forget about the blonde pixie, Lexi's the priority. Real face, real tits, real muff. Get her out of there in one piece and the two of you could be fucking again within the hour.'

'I'm going to the cabin.'

'Ah, maybe half that time, if you don't mind Reagan quotes.'

'You can stay here and be useless...play out your weird little sex scenarios.'

I turned to continue on the right side path, stepping to the left a bit to avoid an oddly immobile frog.

‘Just admit it, Keni...it’s the body you’re rescuing, not her.’

I opened my mouth to respond then overruled myself and focused on the compact, object-real form of the cabin in the near distance.

‘You wouldn’t be going over there if she looked like a dinner lady.’

‘Keep your voice down,’ I shout-whispered back, eyes on the Reagan construct.

‘And I can prove it.’

‘Fucking tannoy cunt,’ I added, carrying on past some puddles, kicking some pebbles towards the greenish lake on the left and...not moving any distance whatsoever.

I stopped, almost toppling forward into the dirt.

What the-...

‘A test, comrade,’ said Nick’s voice, seemingly camped inside my ear.

‘My legs,’ I said, looking down. The signals were leaving my brain and apparently saying *fuck you* to their destination, as I was rooted completely to the ground. ‘Nick...the cabin. I have to get over-...’

‘Test first. Japanese knight routine later.’

I tried to finish my line, but the power had been cut in my throat, my vocal chords. The intention to tell him to get the fuck away from me was there, but the sound waves were defiant. As were the motor functions in all my limbs, the entire body. Arms, legs, hips, neck, all paralysed, all defiant.

Kuso...

An alien puppet show?

Here?

A blurred hand flashed past below, dug down into my pants, planted itself on my crotch.

Then started rubbing up and down.

Gripping the stem.

Thankfully leaving my balls alone.

Images of Lexi and the couch filtered in, followed by Nick rescuing me in the basement, sleeping on my bedroom floor in Liverpool, a conjured-up Sadia with her bare back, asking if I wanted to go again, her blonde hair phasing into a wig as Nick turned round, cum dripping off his lips.

‘There we go, nice and hard...’ Nick said, flicking the top of my dick then shifting his hand upwards to my left temple. ‘Now for the epilogue.’

‘Nick...’

‘Denouement, climax...’

‘There’s no-...’

‘...whatever the word is.’

No fucking time, you koala cunt spelled out all in my head as I looked over at the cabin, its windows, eyes, its door, a mouth, its guts, slowly digesting poor zombified Lexi.

‘There we go, almost set...’

I heard the words and glanced left. His hand remained fixed tight to my temple, with purple vapour flowing out from his wrist, and the longer it flowed, the more feeling I had in my limbs and the less feeling...in my dick...until finally there was no stiffness at all.

‘*Kaplah*, finished,’ Nick said, pulling away his hand.

The fuck did you just do to me came out of my mouth in breath only, followed quickly by a frenzied punch to the side of the pervert’s face.

He didn’t move an inch. Just put the back of his hand up to his cheek and laughed.

‘When words fail...’ he said, taking a step back.

‘Fucking deserved it,’ I replied, and this time the words came out, making me jump a little. ‘What the hell did you just do?’

‘A re-correction, comrade. Giving you your legs back.’

‘Sexual assault, more like.’

I rubbed my temple, looked down at my crotch, scanning both for rogue wisps of purple smoke. There was nothing. Everything looked normal. An erection built and crumbled in under one minute.

‘Now you’ve got your legs back, you better get over there,’ Nick said, pointing at the cabin. ‘Poor zombified what’s-her-name is in big trouble.’

‘Lexi...’

‘I’ll stay here, keep the engine running.’

Shaking my calves out to make sure they were active, then jabbing my temple to dislodge any lingering purple, I turned and marched straight through the puddles, breaking into a fast jog.

‘Psychopath...’ I whispered, when far enough not to be heard.

+++

Just as it had appeared from the other side of the lake, the cabin was fairly nondescript.

Wooden planks eroding at the gutters.

Four steps leading up to a half open door.

Windows dirty enough to obscure whatever weird shit was happening inside.

A plaque the size of a bar of soap hammered onto the front wall that said *REAGAN CULT HANGOUT*, with a yellowed scrap of paper glued on underneath:

‘Lose freedom here and there is no place to escape to.’

I approached carefully, keeping my steps soft as I went up the steps and then breathing in relief when I saw a pile of metal pipes laid out on the porch.

No idea why someone would put them there, didn’t care either.

Any weapon was better than bare hands and fingernails. Especially if this nut had a gun.

Picking up the smallest, most manageable one without spilling over the others, I edged inside the cabin. The lights were off, but that was okay as there was nowhere

for anyone to hide in the main room. No furniture or amenities. No TV. Just a giant, grinning elderly face stuck to the far wall, who I guessed was either an ex-grand dragon or Ronald Reagan.

Kuso... really was a cult...

In the distance, some music started up. Too faint to hear properly, but sounded vaguely poppish. A female voice too...

I checked behind the door, poking the space with my pipe, then moved past it, into the connecting corridor.

Two more doors materialised on either side. Random shouts coming from the one on the left, and the pop song entrenched within the other. I tried the musical door first, turning the handle and heading in with a couple more pipe swings.

Empty, nothing.

Except a projection screen that I swore must've been a hangover from Juana's place...until I blinked a few times and...no, it was still there. Playing a film with a blonde woman bouncing naked on a guy, on a car bonnet, in a deserted farmyard barn. With the pop song in the air around us. *There is nothing left to say, there is nothing I can't do, when I'm here with you.*

Then it stopped.

Buffered.

Started up again.

The music, the blonde woman, the barn, the fucking...

'Kuso...' I muttered, checking the corners of a clearly empty room then backing out slow with my pipe aimed at the screen in case the blonde woman gave up fucking and jumped out at me. Felt like that kind of place. And then even more so when the sex stopped for a second time and looped in again, the lyrics already engraving themselves in my fucking head and...

Pushing awkwardly past the door and out into the corridor, I counted breaths for a few seconds before another shout from the adjacent room broke in and re-activated me.

I took a step closer, listening in to the follow-up.

'Inflation is as violent as a mugger, as frightening as an armed robber...'

Definitely male, definitely not a recording, a little bit exasperated, aggressive even, but no accompanying sex noises. Or murder noises. That's what the positive side of my brain was saying anyway. I'd already put a bag over the other side, though the logic of not hearing any sounds from Lexi at all was still prodding through.

Maybe she'd been re-drugged?

Or wasn't even here?

That idea died as soon as I reached the door. Like the one round front, it was ajar, just enough for me to poke in, and when I did, I had to close my eyes for ten full seconds and re-open before accepting what was laid out in front of me.

'Kuso...'

By the far wall, a graffitied bath tub, with Lexi slouched inside. On her head, a curly, blonde wig. The rest of her body...it was too hard to tell. The water level was quite high, but I could see her collarbone, the bare skin of her arms draped over the side.

'Fucking psycho,' I mumbled, keeping it military low. 'Lexi...are you okay?'

Too soft to expect an answer.

'Lexi...' I tried again, same volume.

Nothing.

If I hadn't also seen her fingers moving, I would've called her dead. But they were moving. Flicking, to be more precise. Without a doubt. And looking closer at the blonde mess on her head, I realized that was moving too...swaying ever so slightly...perhaps a sign that the drugs were starting to wear off.

I took a long, measured breath, timing it with the nonsense coming from the space to the right side of the bath.

A white man with no clothes, some kind of caricature mask over his face, sitting on a child's plastic chair, obviously tugging himself off while reading out loud what I could only guess were famous Reagan quotes.

‘Government is like a baby. An alimentary canal with a big appetite at one end...’

He didn’t look like the biggest guy ever, but there may have been a gun tucked away behind the chair, so I stayed in ninja mode and darted forward, channeling all my rage into one wild pipe swing at his legs.

He must’ve heard my steps as he turned mid-quote and took the hit dead on his shin...then threw himself on the floor, wailing like a hyena.

Dropping the pipe, I jumped on him and punched several times at his temple until he stopped wriggling. Then punched him again when he called me a farmhand communist. Then held my fist up for another...

‘When you can’t make them see the light, let them feel the...’

...and lowered it slowly when the guy’s head hit the floor, the rest of him probably drifting off into a bigger budget torture cabin.

‘It’s okay...’ I told Lexi, swatting the guy’s semi-erect dick away from my thigh and crawling over to the bath tub.

She was in no state to respond, just offering up her right arm as a token gesture, and letting me lift her out of the water. My previous assumption was correct, the guy had stripped her and...with time taken from god knows where...even painted the top part of her pubic hair yellow.

‘Let’s dry you off a bit,’ I said, looking around the room for a towel that didn’t exist. ‘Get you dressed.’

She moaned, aiming and missing a slap at my face.

‘Hey, it’s me, Mark, not the weirdo.’

Another moan, no further slap attempts.

‘Don’t worry, I don’t think he did anything.’

The line was weird as soon as it came out and even weirder when I looked around at the room again. The lighting wasn’t too creepy, warm amber, but the black and white posters of Ronald Reagan pinned up on one face of the wall certainly were. And the guy’s mask...same thing. The quotes he was reading out too. Famous Reagan lines. Which meant he definitely *was* one of those cultists Stahl had been

going on about earlier. Or a disciple trying to bring it all back. Fucking copy of a copy of a copy of a-...

Lexi moaned again, making a stab at planting her feet on the floor and almost slipping back into the tub.

‘Right, leaving time.’

‘The faces...’

‘Come on, put on my jacket,’ I said, soft as I could make it, trying to feed her wet arm into one of the sleeves. ‘Until we find out where your clothes are.’

‘Reagan...everywhere...’

‘And before that weirdo wakes up.’

‘Psychopath...’

‘Yup. Pretty much.’

+++

Back outside, the sun was starting to slip.

Alternating between leading a re-clothed and semi-wet Lexi by the hand and slinging one of her arms over my shoulder – depending how conscious she was on each particular step – we made it back round the side of the lake with only a few stumbles, and then another ten metres or so to Stahl’s Lego car.

Nick himself was propped up against the bonnet, eating a pear from who knows where, humming a triumphant melody as the two of us got closer.

‘The hero returns...with his damp princess.’

‘Liar,’ I spat back, with actual spit flying out and hitting his pear.

He looked puzzled for a moment then gazed down at the noiseless bonnet and smiled. ‘Let me guess, Reagan fanatic?’

‘What?’

‘Masked up, tugging off, quotes from the big man playing in the background...’

‘How the fuck do you know that?’

‘Derrida.’

‘Were you spying?’

He tapped his temple without elaboration then moved to open the passenger side door, throwing the remains of his pear into the nearby trees. I watched his movements, straining to show visibly, tangibly, empirically on my face the annoyance at every casual flick and turn and...just all of it...the raw fucking nonchalance of this alien witch man thing monster sociopath.

‘You just sat out here the whole time?’ I asked, pulling Lexi back as she tried to move towards the car.

‘Some standing, some strolling.’

‘No guilt at all?’

‘Ha, don’t be dramatic, Keni. I just did the clean-up for you.’

‘The what?’

He pointed at the lake, but when I turned, it looked exactly the same as it had earlier. Not even a ripple on the surface.

‘What clean up?’

‘She looks a bit dazed. Must’ve been a strong dosage.’ He tapped the side of the car door. ‘Better squeeze her in, get her back quick to the Lake Arrowhead Recuperation Centre. AKA my place.’

I looked at the track leading into the forest, working out in my head how far it would be if we walked into town.

‘Don’t be a sulk,’ Stahl said, strolling round to the driver’s side and getting in. ‘I’ve already forgiven you for your transgression.’

‘My transgression?’

‘Though if you ever strike me again, it’ll be the end of you. Just so we’re clear.’

‘You’re unbelievable,’ I replied, then gave a performative shake of the head as I guided a woozy Lexi into the passenger seat.

When we were all cramped in and the engine was up and running, Stahl turned to Lexi and, without any preamble or smile, put his palm flat on the side of her neck.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Re-adjustment.’

‘Adjusting what?’

‘Drying her a little too. Relax, hero. It’s a painless task.’

He muttered some words, most in a different language I couldn’t understand, but there were English inserts, like *arthoussse porn* and *too timid to get it up*.

‘Is she okay?’ I asked, after his hand was back [super casual] on the steering wheel.

‘Adjusted.’

‘What does that mean?’

He turned to me and smiled Tsukubashi-like. ‘I think you could probably guess.’

I grunted [also Tsukubashi-like - if someone ever slagged off the Ondōan telepathy fix], running through the possibilities in my head – erasing the memory of the cabin, altering it, getting off on rubbing her neck while pretending to do something mystical, messing with me – but didn’t say any of them out loud.

‘Yeah, she’ll be okay now,’ he said, looking down at her right hand, which was inadvertently resting on his thigh. ‘Frustrated at the vagueness, but okay.’

His words seemed to have a mesmeric effect as Lexi’s eyelids opened halfway up, with some slurred noise following out of her mouth.

‘You...’ she said, finally, taking her hand off his leg...then staring at it like it was a shimmering space whale.

‘There you go, comrade. Better now, ne?’

CHAPTER 43



No warning sign in the swimming pool, and in she dropped.

Half a minute later, the yellow floating bots appeared.

Determined to drag her under.

I knew the episode well, must've watched it at least fifteen times, yet I was still fixed meerkat-like to the screen as Lexi nudged my arm and asked, 'what happened earlier?'

'Today?'

She nodded. 'Feels blurry.'

I adjusted position, almost giving in to the idea of crossing my legs.

Nick had told me that, post-readjustment, she would be able to accept the truth without traumatic association, but I wasn't convinced that any human could do that, especially after only two hours, so I went with my own, slightly tamer version.

'Well, you walked into town, which was quite far. You checked out the VR plaza. Then, apparently, you drove to a local tourist spot...with a photographer you met...and did some weird poses. Artistic poses. In a bathtub.'

She looked at the towel around her neck, feeling its texture like it was a stranger's skin.

‘Then the photographer guy left...and we all came back here for relaxation and GENTE+.’

‘Here is where?’

‘You don’t remember?’

She paused, searching the walls of Nick’s living room for an ownership plaque or comically gigantic envelope with the address on it.

‘This is Nick Stahl’s house,’ I continued, for some reason gesturing at a vaguely Celtic-looking table plate nearby. ‘He’s a friend of mine.’

‘The movie guy?’

‘Before, yeah. Don’t know if he’s done anything recently.’ I frowned at the *Mega Man* cushion behind her, picturing the blue-skinned Nick in the bucket upstairs. ‘He invited me to come out here and...you decided to tag along.’

‘I can’t remember.’

‘Yeah, it was a bit of a blur for me too. Happened very fast.’

A scream from the wall-locked TV, one of the side characters being sucked through a rubbish chute by the mobile security bot.

Lexi followed the death-cry and squinted at the screen. Then switched to the fringes of it. The video cases on the carpet below.

‘Juana,’ she whispered, sitting forward. ‘The caffè.’

‘Yeah, that.’

‘I have to get back there. You too.’

‘Err...’

‘Fuck, our shift must’ve started hours ago...maybe even days.’

‘Dude, forget about all that servitude shit,’ said Nick, strolling in from the left-side arch and throwing a book on my lap. ‘You’re on vacation in the finest recuperation centre in all of Lake Arrowhead. All of California too. No, wait...*Recoveropolis* in Marin County, that one’s pretty decent. But apart from that...’

Lexi’s hand shot up to her temple, another moan of, ‘don’t feel so good.’

‘She’s struggling again,’ I narrated to Nick, who swatted away the line and pointed at the book sprawled half-open on my lap. ‘Yeah, I know. I’ll read it later.’

‘Might not get the chance, dude.’

‘What do you mean *struggling again*?’ Lexi asked, rubbing her head.

‘Ignore the worrier. You had an exciting morning on the road, now you’re feeling the backend of it.’

‘Still feels blurry...’

‘Watch some *GENTE+*, unwind.’ He glanced at the screen, muttering, ‘fucking jazz hat,’ at the Seventh Doctor. ‘And not this junk, something good. *Dead Bitch on Pluto. Blake’s 7. No...Nightmare Castle*. Get that on. It was in the classic horror archive section, last time I checked.’

‘That’s one of my favourite filmns.’

‘Course it is. Barbara Steele, those eyes...the coffin pose...shame she got old. You want a drink? Something to eat?’

Lexi picked up the remote and looked at the buttons...then closed her eyes as if the whole thing were transmitting pain signals directly into her frontal lobe.

‘I think she’s really not well,’ I tried once more, putting down the book he’d thrown me, which of course was his own personal copy of *Moon Prison*.

‘Probably an overlay issue,’ replied Nick, snaking round the back of the couch, resting his elbows on the spot between Lexi and myself.

‘A what?’

‘My adjustment layered on top of Juana’s amateur fiddling. Could be mixing together...crossed images, commands, way too surreal for the human brain to process.’

‘You mean the video caffè stuff?’

‘But at the same time, starkly authentic. Meaning it happened but also couldn’t have happened cos nothing that bizarro could ever truly happen. Not in this object-reality.’

‘What’s he talking about?’ asked Lexi, pushing her head into the back of the couch, eyes still closed.

‘Just rest a bit, dude.’ Nick placed the tips of his fingers on her skull in a tripod formation and pressed inwards. ‘Let me isolate some of the older horror. Make it a little more beige.’

‘This is the third time already,’ I said, half putting a hand out to push him away...and stopping when I saw his eyes firing up purple.

‘Strip away the Juana edits...calcify my parts...and things should all balance out.’

‘And if they don’t?’

‘Then she’s done, comrade. No choice but to medicate and dump the body in the lake.’

I didn’t have time to say *what the psychotic fuck* as he was already laughing, the lilac mist swirling in sharp lashes around his hands.

‘Stop looking so fucking morose, Keni-cat, and read the book I gave you. It’ll help regulate your mood.’

‘Maybe later...’

‘And turn this *Doctor Who* shit off. It’s staining my living room.’

‘...after Lexi feels better.’

He cursed in some other language and the TV switched off. Then, rotating his neck in two imperfect circles, continued with the fingertip work. Based on the repetitive pattern of the movements, it looked like the re-adjustment routine was entering its autopilot stage. His eyes too...lilac and distant...off in the Oort Cloud somewhere...cruising through one of those stretched space pockets he’d been going on about earlier...that he’d probably made up.

Another two minutes and the procedure was complete.

‘Are you okay?’ I asked, putting a therapist’s hand on Lexi’s shoulder.

‘I was just thinking...’

‘Yeah?’

‘...about watching *Nightmare Castle*.’

‘Good idea,’ said Nick from behind, patting Lexi on her other shoulder.

‘Then going out around the lake later. Maybe check out the fake corpse that bobs up to the surface, with the fish coming out of her mouth.’

‘Even better.’

I glanced at Nick, mouthing *what have you done*, and got jumping eyebrows in response.

‘We should try to make the most of our time here,’ continued Lexi, stretching her arms out, yawning deep, ‘before we go back to work. Hopefully, Juana’s doing okay without us.’

‘Err...yeah. Hopefully.’

‘Do you miss her?’ asked Nick, coming back round the side of the couch and sitting down way too close to Lexi.

‘Juana?’

‘Your friendly boss. The Mexican film buff.’

‘A bit. I guess.’

I reeled my head back behind Lexi, trying to get Nick’s attention, then almost went nova when I saw his hand resting on her thigh.

What the fuck did he think he-...

‘I’m sure she’s doing fine in her basement office,’ the alien mage continued, sleaze hand moving down to her knee. ‘Dealing with all those difficult customers.’

‘They are pretty annoying.’

‘Aggressive too.’

Lexi started another *they*...then phased out, her eyes drifting over to the wall screen, narrowing a little as Barbara Steele toured her husband’s lab with a glass of brandy in hand, needling him, praising him.

The film kept its grip, as Nick let go of both her thigh and the conversation thread, and I returned with formless grumbles to *Moon Prison*, managing to find the page I was up to in Fresno and reading seven more before Lexi started rubbing her temple again.

‘Their heads...’ she said, voice coming in from a different dimension.

‘Headache?’ I asked, going into massage mode.

‘Cutting open...big spoon...spiral trap on the-...’

My hand stopped an inch from her scalp, just as she turned to face me, her eyes Barbara Steele-like.

‘Mark...your head...’

‘Err...’

‘...blood on...open at the...’

‘Nick...’

‘...run.’

+++

According to the alien mage/physiologist/Lexi Whisperer, it wasn’t completely normal to relapse this many times in one day, but it also wasn’t abnormal, especially considering the Mexican demonological context.

‘You mean Juana?’ I asked, watching the mist retract itself into his wrists.

‘There, I’ve stabilized it. For now. But we need a tangible aspect to things...if any of this is gonna work.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Stay here. Keep watching the filmn. Anchor her.’

The fifty thousand questions I had leaping off my something-cortex diving board were all shoved back into the changing room as Lexi pushed in from the side and rested her head on my shoulder.

Then lifted it up again seconds later, saying it was too bony.

I shifted position, giving her the top part of my chest.

It seemed to suffice.

‘Are you okay?’ I asked, stroking down the length of one particular strand of hair.

‘Mundane.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Feels like I’ve been sitting in a room watching old films for four years straight.’

‘Yeah.’

I thought about adding some detail, something about the video café, but I wasn’t sure if that was a good idea. *Projection screen room* could lead to *basement office* could lead to *brain buffet* could lead to...

‘I wonder what Juana’s doing right now,’ she said, her stronger hand moving onto my thigh.

‘No idea.’

‘Her mysterious afternoon antics that she never tells us about. I mean, I do wonder sometimes. Where does she go? Who does she see?’

I looked down at the cover of the book next to me, hoping for inspiration, settling for blunt surface. ‘Maybe she’s reading *Moon Prison*.’

‘Ha, in secret...’

‘It does feel a bit 80’s in its aesthetic, which we know she likes.’

‘Ah, I hate that word.’

‘Aesthetic?’

‘It’s really hard to say. Same with that other *S* one...sphere...I always have to slow it down to the basic *s* and *ph* sounds.’

‘That’s not that bad.’

‘Suh-pee-ur. Suh-phere.’

‘When I was a kid, I used to say *geep* instead of sheep.’

She laughed, repeating *geep* a few times.

‘Every time, *geep*. Until I was about six or seven.’ I paused, pulling back the memory of my grandparents taking the piss out of me in the Lake District...and got a Japanese one instead. Ryu shouting right into my ear for buying him *The Fountainhead* instead of *Between Peasants*.

‘*Geep* instead of sheep,’ Lexi said, running her hand down to my knee.

‘Yeah, it was pretty weird.’

‘Counting *geep*...’

‘That *Sh* sound. Just couldn’t do it.’

On screen, the ghost version of Barbara Steele appeared, dragging Lexi away. Not hard to see why. The character’s hair was combed over onto one side, covering the right eye, while the other one compensated by rendering itself planet-like.

‘Be creepier if she weren’t so pretty,’ I muttered, getting a grunt back.

Then a coughing noise.

I turned to Lexi, confused at the volume, then realized it was coming from the other side of the room.

‘Re-introducing everyone’s favourite boss lady and 80’s trash filmn aficionado,’ trumpeted Nick, standing in the doorway and grinning like one of those VR plaza emcees, his arm fully cocooning the shoulders of a stoned-looking Juana.

Both Lexi and I stared gormlessly, probably for very different reasons.

Her, because her boss had just materialised out of thin nitrogen.

Me, because the woman...or demon...who’d tried to eat my brain the night before had just been let out of her bucket.

Out of pure survival reflex, I reached for *Moon Prison*, propping it up edge-first as a weapon.

‘Juana,’ said Lexi, taking her hand away from my knee.

Hello Lexi tried to force its way up the Mexican demon’s throat but by the time it collided with air particles, it sounded more like *hrrree*. That was what my ears caught anyway.

‘What are you doing here?’ Lexi asked, sitting up.

‘Vacation,’ she said softly, coughing the *tion* part.

‘How? Why? It doesn’t-...how did you even get out here? Do you know Nick? From where?’

‘Okay, don’t crowd her,’ said Nick, guiding Juana in front of the wall TV and pausing *Nightmare Castle* seemingly with his finger. ‘She’s still getting used to the clothes I put her in.’

As if promoting the point, Juana shuffled her hands out of the sleeves of the *Moon Factory* Ø hoodie that was clearly XL size, and pinched at the winter pants with little UFOs dotted around. It was an odd combo, given that it wasn’t at all cold outside.

‘Nick...’ I whispered, getting both his and Juana’s attention.

‘Relax, *geep*, she’s not gonna do anything. This is an authenticity session, a more practical readjusting that will...sorry, Lexi, blank realism, just gonna say it...help you deal with the images that are probably starting to seep back in as I speak.’

‘Images?’

‘Ah, okay, they’re not quite there yet. Never mind. You’re still aware of them on some level though.’ He leaned into Juana’s ear and whispered thirty seconds worth of pep talk, then took a step back. ‘Juana is going to do a mix of apologetics and excuse-making. To you, Keni...sorry, Mark...for trying to eat your brain. And to you, Lexi, for mesmerizing you intermittently during the last nine months and forcing you recently to assist her in murdering sleazy pieces of shit in the video caffè basement.’

The spiel was so overt, so unbroken in form that neither I nor Lexi said a thing. I knew it all already.

And Lexi...was probably in shock. Or confusion.

‘Juana...the stage is yours,’ said Nick, gesturing to the spot the Mexican cannibal was already occupying.

Tugging at the outside sleeves of her classic VR hoodie, Juana did her own version of clearing her throat, which was basically just a long *ehrrrrrrr* sound, and then, phlegm exorcised, started to speak.

‘Mark...*lo siento*. Forcing you down to the basement and trying to eat your brains...like that...was a low moment. An arrogant moment. You’re quite a strong man, physically, and...I admit that...on a base level...I did enjoy the power I had

over you. The reversal of things. But it was a shameful act and...I am sorry. I hope you can forgive me....and try to remember the better times we shared.'

My brain whirred, attaching the words to the image in front of me.

Juana in a *Moon Factory* Ø hoodie.

In winter pants with cartoon UFOs on the legs.

Inside an alien sociopath's mansion.

Awkward, exhausted.

Saying sorry for attempting to eat my brain.

I looked at Nick to try and make sense of it all, but he was too far into his performance, mouthing *I forgive you, Juana* to me and mimicking a tiny hand clap.

'This is too weird,' I said, finally, staring off at the wall TV.

Juana made another *ehrrrrrr* sound and turned to her other staff.

'Lexi...*es difícil de...*' She paused, pulling the collar of her hoodie up, the top of the *Moon Factory* logo folding into her neck. 'I don't really know what to say. Nick told me that you're having trouble adjusting...due to my poor memory manipulation skills. I suppose it's possible. Things that I've done...have been a bit sloppy the last few months. Maybe I didn't take enough care. But...'

'Apology,' whispered Nick from the side.

Juana's pupils flashed yellow for a millisecond...then sank back into the cornea as the demon host nodded and the words continued.

'I did not intend to mess up your head...this bad. And I want you to know...you, specifically...*mi querida* Lexi...were never in any danger. Not in my basement. I would never have-...nothing would have happened there. Not to you. I hope you can forgive me.'

Juana added a cough at the end, then looked at Nick, who clapped his hands together and retook his stage in front of the TV screen.

'There we go, all sorted. Give it a few minutes to filter through, wrap up the horror film and we should be good to go in...two hours?'

He looked at me as if it were an actual question, but all I could offer back was, ‘what?’

‘Juana...two hours?’

The Mexican hesitated, then lifted her shoulders in slo-mo.

‘Lexi...’ Nick walked forward, putting his hands out and framing her in a skewed camera shot. ‘By the Lynchian look on your face, I’m guessing the basement scenes are reloading. Good, good. Key points to remember: Juana is a demon but an empathetic, moral one. Things got out of hand due to addiction-stroke-depression issues. She only ate men who groped or sexually assaulted you beforehand. Your skull was off limits cos she both likes and respects you. If things are still fucked up after an hour, I can go in with the mist again. But it’s better long-term if I don’t. You know, we’ve all gotta face up to baroque-realism sometimes...right, Keni?’

There was no sane way to respond to any of that, so I looked at *Moon Prison* again, and then Lexi. She seemed to be doing okay. Hopefully, Lynchian was taking the paved road towards Capra town, not the dirt track to abject Spasojevic.

I patted her on the thigh, and said softly, ‘she didn’t try to eat your brain.’

My intent: plain realism.

The outcome: void confusion.

Her eyes floated back to Juana, who had been put on the *bouncy castle* chair next to my side of the couch, and then to *Nightmare Castle*, which Nick had started playing again [without the remote].

Both Barbara Steele and her lover were taunting the murderous husband, trailing him around his own castle before finishing him off.

Then the credits played.

Shakily.

‘*Devil Rides Out?*’ suggested Nick, already flicking onto the menu selection screen.

‘Beforehand...’ muttered Lexi, looking at Juana.

‘Or how about *Countess Dracula*? Ingrid Pitt with blood-soaked tits, plus the stable scene where the young guy sucks on one of her nipples. You’ll like that bit, Keni.’

‘Lexi...’ I said, framing her face and backgrounding everything else.

‘The V guy...groping me in the-...slurping noise...emptied-out skull.’

‘I’m not sure I like that tone,’ said Nick, giving up on the TV screen and coming over, swatting away my defensive hand.

‘She’s remembering it all,’ I protested, swatting air back.

‘Yes, badly.’

‘Licking lips...brain crumb on cheek...’ continued Lexi, looking over at Juana, who attempted about fifty-seven different apology formations with her hands before just surrendering and slapping her palms flat on the arms of the chair. ‘Blood streams...Jammer on the-...’

‘Looks like it’s mist season again,’ said Nick, replanting his already purple-swirl fingertips onto Lexi’s skull.

‘You can really fix this?’

‘In the blink of a human eye.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Seven thousand per cent.’

‘What?’

‘Alien joke.’

‘That means...you definitely can?’

‘Jesus. Read the fucking book, Keni. Stop distracting me. Please.’

+++

With no real grounding in psychology or purple mist therapy, I couldn’t do anything tangible except sit back and either read *Moon Prison* or watch *Countess Dracula* on the wall screen.

Reading a book in front of others was too weird, so I opted for the latter.

Surprisingly, it was quite watchable, with a decent budget, though when the tits scene arrived, I did feel oddly bloodless.

Maybe it was the surroundings.

The Mexican cannibal sitting on one side of me, and my girlfriend wrestling with a supernaturally tinged psychotic break on the other.

It definitely wasn't Ingrid Pitt's fault.

She looked stunning and...I could put together the scenes of myself and the Countess, kissing by candlelight, playing with her breasts, fucking on a castle bed...but there was nothing attached to it all...no feeling, no lust, no segway into Lexi sex...just a dick signifier going in and out of a vagina signifier over and over and over and over and infinitely over...as if we'd accidentally switched onto a sex-ed channel for alien-skinned xeno-biologists.

What Lexi thought of it all, I had no idea, though I could see Juana was perched forward, hand on the side of her thigh.

Probably inserting herself in there instead of the soldier guy.

Just like me.

The scene changed, the film progressed.

Exposed as a murderer, the Countess became increasingly maniacal, yet somehow didn't lose Lexi along the way. In fact, she started adding comments of semi-support, like, 'she should bathe in his blood too,' and, 'if she picked on sleazy men it wouldn't be so bad,' and the final one, during the denouement: 'her daughter's such a flake, I would've tried to stab her too.'

Apparently, this was a good thing, as when the film had finished, Nick turned off the screen and announced, 'the recovery is 90% complete.'

I looked at Lexi for subject-reaction, but she'd already left the film and was now skimming through *Moon Prison*.

'It's nearly five now...half an hour to get ready, then we head out.'

'Out?' I asked, looking at the early evening shade outside the window. 'Where?'

‘See if we can find some excitement.’

‘Where are we going out to?’ I tried again, glancing at Juana for back up...and then switching quickly to the *Mega Man* cushion as my brain reeled back the basement horror.

‘Where are we going to?’ Nick repeated, staring at the cover of *Moon Prison* in Lexi’s hands. ‘Into the jaws of the night, Keni-cat.’

‘Err...’

‘The four of us.’

‘Are you sure that’s...’

‘Don’t say *err*.’

‘...wise?’



A full loop of the lake was a must, according to Nick, in order to fully appreciate the difference between daytime Arrowhead and nightscape Arrowhead, though the only real change I could see was the weird roadside lighting system - dark blue strips attached to promo-boards every ten metres or so - which, in effect, made it seem like the whole place was a closed-off racing circuit.

Somehow, I'd ended up squeezed in the back with Juana, head against the side window, arm at a right angle in case she tried anything.

Luckily, the Mexican cannibal...correction, ex-cannibal, by order of her alien protector...was pretty lax for most of the first loop, though when we passed the turn off track for the Reagan Cult Hangout, she put her nose against the glass and asked what the [something Spanish] that was all about.

'Wacky memories for Lexi down that way,' replied Nick, accelerating another 10km. 'Best not to dig too deep.'

'Wacky?' asked Lexi, frowning.

'In a Debordian sense. Bathtub you were in, the dim lighting, blonde wig...all spectacle, no real violence inherent in any of it.'

'Are we stopping somewhere soon?' I asked, leaning in between the two front seats.

‘Wah, I thought you were asleep.’

‘That diner caffè maybe?’

‘No way, not on the same day. Too desperate. Besides, I’ve got somewhere better in mind. Over on the other side of the lake.’

I checked past Lexi’s shoulder, catching a flash cut of another blue light strip outside. ‘You mean we’ve already been past it?’

‘Don’t get bolshie, Keni-cat,’ spat Nick, half-throwing an elbow back and clipping the top of his own seat. ‘I said we needed to do a full loop first and now we have. Next stop, the Barn.’

‘Is that a restaurant?’

‘At the front, yeah. Barr and MMA out back. Mostly ex-filmn stars waddling around drunk, but now and then they cast some voodoo...reel in a couple of semi-pros.’

I glanced at Lexi, who was staring left at the moon-sheened lake, rubbing her temple again.

‘You want me to massage you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Wah, quick answer.’

‘At the back, hard.’

I put my hands on top of her skull and slowly made my way lower down. After a minute, her own hands dropped and she started making ‘ahhhh’ sounds.

‘Feeling anything?’ asked Nick, turning onto the main street and loudly tutting at the DINER caffè to the left, and then the VR plaza on the opposite side, both signs the same tone of neon green.

Lexi didn’t answer, which made me a bit anxious as I knew what Nick was like when he got ignored, but then I looked at the windscreen mirror and realized he was staring at me.

‘Huh?’

‘Do you feel anything?’ he repeated, eyes sparking lilac.

‘Not especially,’ I answered, acting out a confused look.

He stared a little longer, eyes gradually dimming, then went back to the road.

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‘Well, this is huge fucking disappointment.’

‘Maybe it’s not open yet?’ I offered, peering out from the back window of the Lego mobile.

‘All day fights, all day food. No, wait, there’s a sign up. Hang on.’ Nick sat forward and focused on the alleged barr-stroke-fight house that did indeed look like a giant converted barn. ‘Closed for disinfection.’

‘Where are you seeing that?’

‘The sign on the door.’

‘I can’t see anything.’

‘Cos you’ve got the eyes of a cave fish.’

‘How about we go back to the main street, try the VR plaza?’ suggested Lexi, rotating her neck in slow circles.

‘What, lose ourselves in *Nightmare Castle*...’

‘Or another game.’

‘...turn into a piece of fucking plastic, no stake in the world, no consequences.’

‘Err...it’s just VR...’

‘Yeah, fraudulent shit. Realm of a cosplaying coward.’

‘Okay...’

‘She’s right, it’s just a bit of fun,’ I interjected, poking my head through the middle of the seats again. ‘Unless there’s something better to do?’

‘What do you say, Juana?’ Nick asked, turning back to the right side window.

‘VR cowardice or real life fun time?’

‘Cowardice is a bit strong.’

‘Juana?’

I sat back and pushed against the window...then turned...also curious to see what the Mexican brain eater would say. At first, nothing. She just sat there, marooned in the fringes of the Barn, pulling at the strings of her *Moon Factory* Ø hoodie.

After hearing an owl hoot four separate times outside, she finally responded, asking where the worst of the lake people lived.

It was a strange question...then a sinister one when I remembered Nick's defence of her earlier. *She only ate bad people.*

Our alien tour guide, however, didn't seem to care.

'Bad is relative, but I know where the biggest number of people will be.'

'Is it nearby?' asked Juana, hand pausing on the hoodie string.

'About a seven minute drive. Forty seconds if I use the purple. Nah, I shouldn't do that, it's disrespectful. Might clip one of those early 90's action stars...Brian Bosworth, Cynthia Rothrock, Billy the Blank, one of those Baldwin creatures. Okay, no cheats. Juana's the map-maker tonight. Let's check out Kip's place, see if he's got anyone over.'

I breathed out, keeping it just the right side of frustration.

Kip's place did not sound like a relaxing time.

In fact, if we weren't going to do VR or eat dinner at DINER then I would've preferred to just go back and sleep, maybe play around with Lexi if her brain was stable enough.

I looked forward and saw her grinding her temples again.

Or just let things be for a while.

Give her time to adapt.

To *this*.

+++

A quarter loop round Lake Arrowhead and we were outside yet another Frankenstein mansion [half-Spanish Colonial, half art deco, half gothic and half a dozen other styles], this one signposted in garish white neon as *KIP'S PLACE*.

My brain instantly ejected about a dozen capsules of epinephrine as I saw the array of expensive-looking cars parked along the perimeter stucco wall, with a few more dumped erratically on the dark forest side of the road.

Lexi seemed to share my sense of unease, as the four of us walked through the incongruously rustic front gates and onto a driveway lined with giant bonsai trees.

'Is it too late to check out the VR plaza,' she whispered, pulling me back by the *Bored Real Hard* jacket [that Nick had gifted] to create a gap between us and the other two.

'Give it ten minutes. If it's too bleak, we'll leave.'

'No conspiring back there,' shouted Nick, jumping across to one of the huge bonsai trees and chopping off a branch with his bare hand. 'We're here for at least two hours, so you better make the most of it.'

'Two hours?'

'It's easy. Start with a smile. You too, Juana.'

The Mexican performed a half second grin then returned to blankness.

'Okay, forget smiling, it's inauthentic. And the people in here probably wouldn't notice anyway. Don't touch that.'

I stopped, my hand an inch away from the fallen bonsai branch.

'If Kip sees you, he'll get annoyed.'

'But it's fake...isn't it?'

'All the more reason not to break the spell. No, no follow-ups. Keep moving. We'll go straight round the back where the water is, see what's going on.'

Pushing up straight, I let Lexi fold her hand into mine, then followed the trail of the alien and cannibal demon around the side of what looked, basically, like a cut-out simulacrum of Nick's place a few kilometres away.

'He can't stop us,' whispered Lexi again, 'if we really wanna leave.'

‘Actually...’

‘It’s not like he’s our dad.’

The phrase *alien dad* crept onto the cliff of my motor cortex, caught sight of the drop and edged back again. No, don’t tell her that. She’ll think I’m crazy. Mexican demon and bathtub perversion were more than enough for today. Not to mention the several bouts of memory fingering Nick had conducted.

Unless he’d paved the way for that kind of acceptance?

Or she knew already and knew that I knew too?

Should I ask her?

Make an offhand remark, see if she bites?

The thought stretched out a little further then evaporated into the worst kind of neutrino dust as we turned the corner into the pool area.

‘Kuso...’

Live Varo recreation was my first reaction as blue vapour swirled over an arrow-shaped pool, drifting between live flesh sticks and cocktail tubes and plastic alien models and out through the branches of yet more gargantuan bonsai trees.

No, too weird.

I blinked and tried again.

Same image, only sharpened.

The mist was real, pumped out by industrial-sized fans set up in each corner, and the flesh sticks were in reality dozens of identically tanned guests, half of them fully naked, standing around the garden with retro-futuristic wine goblets loose in their hands.

Some were in the pool, either swimming or hitting each other with what I hoped were inflatable swords. Others were on the sun-loungers at the side, chatting, giving oral sex...chatting again. One guy was trying to insert himself into the back of the plastic-replica Ondōan model and film himself doing it.

Caligula meets Tsukubashi meets *Caligula II, III and IV*, I thought, editing my initial description.

Definitely no Varo.

The background music stopped, then started up again, playing the theme tune to something very familiar...an old sci-fi thing...

'Is that the *Portals & Portals* song?' asked Lexi, leaning in to my shoulder.

Ah P & P, that was it.

But why was it playing here, with all this madness?

'Weird choice...,' muttered Lexi, reading my mind.

'Very weird.'

We kept going, towards the pool, trying not to lose sight of Nick through all the sensualist lunacy.

As we got closer, I did a double-take at two of the guests...it seemed that I was looking at a de-aged James Caan and Shibusaki Kou, but then someone got thrown on top one of them and snapped Caan's neck and I realized they were both incredibly life-like dummies. There was no time to reflect on this as the surrounding imagery was even more ludicrous. To the left was a woman painting a fox green, a remarkably still fox, and next to her was a naked white guy pouring flour onto the dick of a slightly browner white guy, giving a few strokes, then lunging forward and slurping it off.

'Is that coke?' asked Lexi, swatting her hand through a particularly thick swathe of blue mist to get a better look.

'Thought it was flour.'

'That would be weird. Or weirder. Jesus, are they fucking down there?'

I followed her line of sight to the shallow of the pool, where a black guy was thrusting behind a white guy, who himself was thrusting into the back of an Indian woman dressed as the backlash version of *Red Sonja*. It was hard to tell if they were really doing it at first, but as we moved past them, it was clear that they were.

'They don't look very excited...,' said Lexi, half-waving when the guy at the back noticed her looking.

'Probably too coked up to know what's happening.'

‘Floured up.’

I laughed, like a stuttered cough, then really processed the line and laughed in a series of stuttered coughs.

‘Or maybe they’ve done it so many times that it’s...’

Her line trailed off as Nick shouted at us from the patio screen door, telling us to stop perving on the pool kids and get inside.

‘I’m almost scared to enter,’ Lexi said, dodging a flying sword from the pool.

‘If this is what’s happening outside...’

‘Maybe we can find the front door, sneak out.’

‘Good idea.’

‘Walk back to the VR plaza.’

‘Even better idea.’

One of the shallow end fucking guys used someone else’s head as leverage to pull himself out of the pool, sucked in a cloud of blue mist then zig-zagged up to us, reaching out for Lexi’s hand.

‘What the-...’

‘Pool fuck,’ he shouted, puzzled at the resistance.

‘Get your fucking paw off her,’ I said, balling my fist and then deballing it when I saw Lexi bite his hand and shove him full force back into the water.

‘Fuuuuucking Viking slut,’ he shouted, holding up his wounded hand and biting into the small speck of blood dribbling off. ‘I’ll be coming for you later, Agatha tha tha tha.’

‘Front door,’ Lexi repeated, pulling me towards the patio screen door.

‘Yup.’

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In contrast to the Caligula-Marinetti meltdown in the pool area, the living room appeared relatively tame.

But still oddball.

Mostly cos it had been renovated to look like the Federation OPS centre from *Moon Factory 7*.

Walking in, I actually checked my temple to see if I was patched in cos, not only did the décor look pretty much identical – xanadu grey walls, pale green and blue lights - but a lot of the guests were dressed in game-appropriate costumes too. Some had even altered their faces to look like the main cast members of the original *Moon Factory 7* TV serial, the thing that spawned a later relaunch that the game version was based on, which meant they were now copies of a copy of a copy eschewing a copy that the original writers of the TV serial probably copied from somewhere else.

Kuso, my head...

‘What the fuck is this?’ asked Lexi, taking a drink from a woman dressed as a near-future factory engineer.

‘Half of them must be staff,’ I replied, prodding one of the monitors on the wall and jumping a bit when it lit up pale blue. ‘Wah, it’s active.’

‘Course it is,’ shouted Nick from a nearby swivel chair. ‘This is Kip’s place, a giant fuck you to your precious VR.’

Both Lexi and I took a few steps over, stopping when we saw there were no free seats for us. The couches were taken by guests who were actually chatting to each other, without fucking or green paint – or they were taking a break? - while Nick and Juana were seated on two of the plush in-game chairs reserved for OPS Command.

‘My good friend Nick here exaggerates,’ said the youngish man with greying hair sat on the captain’s chair between them, presumably Kip. ‘VR has its place in the world...the same way a Picasso starts with a sketch pad. What I do is extrapolate, and reconfigure. Pull out the best parts...the core of the thing.’

I looked at Nick’s reaction, which was limited, then did another scan of the reconfigured space. It truly was the *Moon Factory 7* OPS room, an almost identical replica. Same size, same colours, same props inserted in the same places. And I only

used *almost* out of logical caveat cos I couldn't believe that anyone would truly, physically go to the trouble of copying all of this down to the very last atom.

'Looks like a replica of *Moon Factory 7* to me,' said Lexi, brain obviously on the same track.

'Hmm, you're a pretty command officer,' replied Kip, sitting up straight in his chair and adjusting what I now realized was the skin mask on his face. A *Youth Plus* rip of his own, younger face, if I had to guess. 'Why don't you come and sit by my feet, let me tell you about the time I saved the *Phantasm* franchise?'

'Sorry, my boyfriend and I are leaving soon.'

'Then it'll be an exclusive for my second in command.' He turned to Juana and kissed her on the hand, then *accidentally* brushed along her thigh as his arm dropped back down. 'Only known her two minutes, but already she intrigues me a great deal.'

'Thought you didn't like Mexicans,' said Nick, finishing the drink in his hand and then grabbing another.

'Could be that hoodie you're wearing,' continued Kip, putting a hand out to silence Nick, 'or those odd pajama pants. Are they UFOs, those little cartoon picture things?'

'They're not mine,' Juana answered, her gaze half on Kip, half outside by the pool.

'Or that ethereal yellow glint in your eyes.'

'Contact lenses.'

'Really?'

'*Si, claro.*'

Repeating *contact lenses* in a low growl, he reached for her waist and slipped his hand around, and, for some reason I couldn't fathom, Juana let it remain there.

Wah, was she actually interested in him?

It wasn't like she could eat his brain here...not with a party going on. Unless she managed to get him somewhere quiet? But Nick wouldn't allow that. This Kip

lunatic was his neighbour, his friend. There'd be real, legal consequences. Wouldn't there?

Something pointy nudged me in the side and I turned to see Lexi tilting her forehead towards an unguarded door on the far side of the room.

'Think it's the way out,' she whispered, almost ventriloquist standard.

'After you.'

Phasing ourselves out of the weird Juana-Kip dynamic, we worked our way slowly round *OPS*, feigning interest in the wall monitors, saying, 'nice costume,' to a few of the guests, until, finally, we reached the moon-base door.

Beyond it was the hallway, which was much more like a regular house interior, and at the end of that was a large wooden entrance slab.

'Just open and go,' said Lexi, pushing the handle down, letting in the night air...plus, somehow, a few wisps of rogue blue vapour from the pool.

'All the way to *Nightmare Castle*.'

'Works for me.'

We walked out through the exterior arch and onto the driveway and, after a few steps, turned to see if we were being followed.

Apparently we were...by the entire swimming pool area.

'What...'*'* was all I could eke out, and Lexi couldn't do much better, except to add *fuck* on the end.

We turned back to what should've been the main gate leading out to the loop road...and saw, instead, the space station living room, a smirking Nick sitting with one leg hung over the other in Kip's captain chair.

'One more hour, officers,' he said, not a shout exactly but near enough the same volume.

'How did you...'*'* I started, then answered my own query with *alien*.

Lexi didn't have the same luxury, seizing my jacket sleeve, pulling me back over to the *OPS* exit, through the hallway and out the front door again.

'Illusion,' she said, over my attempts to pull her back.

Then *fuck* again as we re-appeared back within the Xanadu grey walls of the living room.

‘What is happening?’ she asked, turning to me.

‘Don’t know,’ I lied.

It wasn’t much of an answer, so she walked over to the chair Juana had been perched on the edge of, gripped the back cushion and asked the side of Nick’s head directly.

‘Part of you does not want to leave,’ he answered, waving his hand towards me and then gesturing at the third chair. ‘Because it’s fun here, isn’t it? Especially out by the pool.’

‘That doesn’t explain the magic trick.’

‘No trick. Just misplaced memory.’

‘What?’

‘Keni...are you sitting down or not?’ he asked, leaning over and dragging the replica chair a foot closer to me.

‘Hey...answer me,’ shouted Lexi, pulling Nick back roughly by the sleeve.

‘What misplaced memory?’

‘Yours and his.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘It means you left twice already, dude. Got about a hundred metres down the road then talked yourselves out of it. Came back, punched the swimming pool guy, and walked in here. Second time, you kissed and groped each other on the sun lounger for a bit...with zero reaction from Keni, by the way...and now you’re here, being dangerously assertive to your very generous and forgiving host.’

‘No...that didn’t happen.’

‘Give it a minute, things will fill in.’

Lexi took her hand off his sleeve in a gradual sliding motion and looked at me. There was nothing I could offer except a shrug and verbal distraction. ‘Where’s Juana?’ I asked, searching the faces in the room.

‘Feeding.’

‘What?’

‘Actually, it’s probably time to check in on her. Don’t want things to get out of hand.’

He stood up and walked off towards the same moon-base door we had taken during our thwarted attempts at escape, grabbing another gassy citrine cocktail from a bored-looking technician staff on the way out. Lexi and I stayed seated for a few seconds longer, stuck in a memory feedback loop, deathly silent, deathly immobile, until two guys dressed as lava-skinned Kontolians came over and breached the bubble skin, asking if they could do one line off my thigh and one off Lexi’s muff, assuming she wasn’t overly hairy.

‘The fuck is this place?’ she asked, vaguely to my ear but also to the invisible gas atoms in the corridor as we chased after Nick, who was already halfway up the stairs to the second floor.

‘Hope they don’t call the cops,’ I replied, half looking back at the living room, wincing at one of the Kontolians still clutching his calf.

Paintings of surreal Toyen-esque landscapes marked the wall as we went up, Lexi almost tripping on the little railing spread across the top stair, possibly to keep in a pet, or maybe an impromptu prank by Nick.

‘Where did he go?’ she asked, squinting at the *Phantasm VT* Hell Immigration corridor ahead of us, its red lighting on the ceiling completely at odds with the hall we’d just come from...and even the *Moon Factory* shit downstairs in the living room.

‘Over there,’ I replied, pointing at the end of the corridor.

‘You sure?’

‘Door’s open.’

She turned and peered back down over the staircase railings. ‘We could make another run for it.’

‘And end up in OPS again.’

‘Would we?’

She was reaching for her head, hand shaking, so I intercepted and patted for her, adding a few pinches of massage for good measure.

‘Did we black out? Is that what happened?’

I opened my mouth...

‘And don’t say you don’t know.’

...and closed it again.

‘You stupid fucking idiot,’ came from the open door at the end of the corridor, the staggered laugh buried within telling us that it was probably Nick. We walked forward, blinking through the occasional flash-waves of red light, and when we got close, I moved ahead a step and pushed the already open door into the wall behind.

‘Fuck...’ let out Lexi, hand covering her neck instead of her mouth.

It was a fair reaction, given the scene in front of us.

Juana on the pillows of a king-size bed, claws on the head of an unconscious Kip, blood streaming down both her chin and his skin mask cheeks.

Nick posed headmaster-like next to her, arms folded, assessing the damage.

‘Told you four times, vapour only...and you go and do this.’

Juana let go of Kip’s head and reached for the *Moon Factory* Ø hoodie on top of the pillow behind her.

‘What, no excuses?’

‘He’s not dead,’ she replied monotone, poking Kip in the neck and getting a moan in response.

‘No, but he’s got a huge hole in his head. Which is gonna need some explaining.’

‘I can take care of it.’

‘Fuck. I’ll have to go down, grab some witnesses. Rub his wound on...’ Nick paused, scanning the room for something. ‘...that table over there. Implant a slip memory. Mess up the carpet, drop some ornaments, cigarette papers. And even then it might not be sufficient.’

‘What’s happening...’ whispered Lexi, finally processing the horror in front of her.

‘Lexi, *esto no es...*’ The Mexican wiped her chin with the duvet, then dragged half of it off the bed as she pushed her feet down onto the floor. ‘This isn’t what it looks like. He said he wanted to practise Spanish...then groped my tits...slobbered on them...pulled my knickers down and tried to finger me. Not a good guy.’

‘You ate his brain.’

‘No, no. I nibbled on it only...with restraint.’

Lexi laughed, one solitary, maniacal *HA*, then turned and zombie-walked back out into the flashing red lights.

‘Give us a hand, Keni,’ said Nick, whistling as he lifted a mumbling Kip up level with his shoulder. ‘We’ve gotta get him over to the table, before he comes to.’

‘I’m going after Lexi.’

‘Nah, don’t worry about her, she’s still adapting. Be fine in an hour. Here, grab the other arm, he’s slipping.’

‘Get Juana to help you. She’s the one who did all this.’

‘That sounds like a *no*. And with an annoyingly caustic tone too. You bold little shit. Okay, fine, go fetch Lexi and wait in the car. We’ll be down in a bit. Juana, you’re up.’

‘I’m going with Lexi too...’ said Juana, fingers trying to fix her hoodie on properly.

‘The fuck you are, witch-face. Get over here.’

‘I have to explain to her, what happened, what he--...’

‘Now.’

Freezing halfway to the door, I stood like a first-day extra and watched as Juana stiffened suddenly, walked back to the bed with her head slanted to one side, then rebooted abruptly with her hand on Kip’s elbow. Possibly due to her demon nature, she took it quite well, muttering something in rough Spanish before rolling up her right arm sleeve and getting on with the task at hand. The task that she was definitely responsible for. Insane Mexican can-...

‘You going after her physically or conceptually?’ poked Nick, hands under Kip’s armpits.

‘What?’

‘Cos if you’re just gonna stand there...’

My brain caught up, pulling back the pool perverts downstairs and Lexi attempting to stumble through them. Then the bathtub incident in the Reagan shack. The basement back at the-

‘Well?’ asked Nick, lowering Kip’s head down to the edge of the table.

I turned and walked out without another word, swinging the door shut behind me as two naked guys emerged from the next room along, one of them clutching an engineering prop.

‘Still occupied,’ I said, waiting under the Phantasm lights until they’d reached the stairs, then blowing out a long *kuuuuuuu* and following their trail.



It took about ten minutes to find Lexi hiding out near the fringes of Kip's garden, and another ten minutes to convince her not to hitchhike back to Fresno.

My main argument: you're not thinking rationally right now.

The argument in my head: you might get kidnapped by another Reagan fanatic.

Obviously, she didn't agree – *my boss keeps trying to eat people's brains, is it rational to stick around?* – but something inside, possibly a Nick Stahl-influenced neuron, carried her back to the car, and as soon as we were in the back seat, away from all the lunacy, she put her head on my shoulder and said, 'better when it's just us.'

'Yeah, quieter.'

'No weirdos getting in the way.'

I stroked down the side of her face, stopping at the shoulder. There were no sounds from the party in the house, by the pool, no sounds from the overgrown Bonsai trees to the side. If I'd closed my eyes, we could've been anywhere.

Naturally, the silence was short-lived.

The door on the passenger side opened...then slammed shut. After several muffled shouts in Spanish, probably insults, it opened again, with Juana being pushed

down onto the seat, the top of her *Moon Factory* Ø hoodie awkwardly scrunched up on one side of her head.

‘Lexi...’ she started, turning to the rear, but was interrupted by the click of the driver’s door, and then Nick barking Herzog-like to wipe the fucking blood off her chin. Then softening instantly...to a jarring degree...and adding, ‘in case it drops on the upholstery.’

‘It’s all done?’ I asked, not really sure what *done* meant in this context.

‘Some on your hood too,’ he said, reaching over to Juana and scrubbing it off himself.

‘Head spurt,’ the Mexican replied, glaring at his wrist.

‘Hmm. Kip is an unorthodox guy. Don’t worry, I’ll get you a new hoodie back at my place. Give you a proper bath too.’

‘Is it all taken care of?’ I tried a second time, leaning forward onto the shoulder of Nick’s seat.

‘We’re getting to that, Keni-cat.’ He steered the car through the gates [clipping the side of one of them] and out onto the racing circuit road, its dark blue light and tree combo oddly comforting. ‘Yes, in answer to your pedantry, everything has been taken care of. Kip is resting after a serious fall. The head wound is not as bad as first thought. No need for medical attention tonight.’

‘Won’t someone come up and find him, see all that blood?’

‘Already fixed.’

‘Huh?’

‘Witnesses, dude. Got three of them to corroborate the fall story. Another two to feel guilty about not stopping it.’

‘They really believe he fell?’

‘Of course, saw it with their own eyes. *Kuso*, this road is pretty at night. Look at this turn coming up, the oval window gap between the trees...’

Out of toy soldier habit, I followed his command and looked across at the lake view. The alien was right, it was pretty. You could see the *DINER* café and VR plaza

as block silhouettes on the other side of the shore, singled out by their green neon glow. Alluring. Monopolistic. Exact same place Lexi had got abducted from ten hours earlier.

‘Didn’t mean to bite him,’ said Juana, creeping round the front seat again, reaching a hand out towards Lexi with leper-like conviction, ‘but he provoked me...’

‘Yeah, you said that already.’

‘...and I reacted. It was too hard to-...too close. Couldn’t stop it.’

‘Don’t over-apologize,’ said Nick, eyes on the road up ahead.

‘I’m explaining this to her...the reasoning of-...’

‘You fucked up control-wise, not the actual sucking thing itself. And there was some discipline involved. Not much, but some.’

‘She made a hole in his head,’ interjected Lexi, pushing deeper into the back seat to escape Juana’s floating hand.

‘More of a dent actually.’

‘Not as bad as it looked,’ added Juana, retracting her hand, ‘from your angle.’

‘You cratered the heads of all those guys at work,’ continued Lexi, leaning in against the side window. ‘Right in front of me. Asking about my time in LA. Feeding me those drinks. Cratered them...their heads with bare hands...the spoon...’

Her voice trailed off on the last line, followed by slow repetition of *cratered their heads*, as if the words themselves were a puzzle to her.

Juana glanced at Nick, scraping at the dry blood still on her chin. ‘She remembers.’

‘Yeah, but her tone seems off.’

‘You were in LA?’ I asked, moving in next to Lexi’s shoulder, trying to remove her from the two *things* in the front.

It didn’t work.

The eyes were somewhere out through the side window, probably doing memory collage on the passing blue lights.

But her lips were still moving.

‘You cratered the heads of all those guys...at work. Cratered their heads. Put a crater in their heads. Blood...on the floor...streams of it. That was real. Real blood streams. I saw that, it happened. It did happen. You talked to me as it was happening. It happened. You talked to me...’

‘She’s drifting,’ said Juana, reaching a hand over again and immediately having it yanked back by Nick.

‘Not here,’ he said, keeping his hand on the shoulder of Juana’s seat. ‘I’ll fix her when we get back.’

‘That’ll be too long.’

‘Just a couple more bends.’

Blocking them both out, I positioned my face in front of Lexi, hooked onto the moon-sized pupils and assured her in my best Tsukubashi voice that it wasn’t her fault. I even repeated some of Juana’s sophistry, that those guys at the caffè were all perverts who’d tried to grope her in the back room.

‘The bathtub,’ she continued, eyes on my reflection...superficially. ‘I was in there, naked. A skinny guy wanking on the chair opposite. I can see it, the noises. He said he was going to paint me blonde for Ronald Reagan. And take pictures to memorialise it. But there was no camera there. He wasn’t-...I didn’t ask him to-...he took me to that cabin. Drugged me. Said he was going to paint me blonde. For Ronald Reagan. Take pictures to...pictures for the...’

‘Nick...’ I said, waving my hand in front of her face.

He answered by braking suddenly, swerving the car over to one of the blue lights, parking diagonally and then scrambling over into the back seat. In theory, three adults in the back seat of a Lego car should’ve been impossible, but, in practice, it appeared to be fine. In fact, there was enough room for him to stretch his arms out rod-straight, no bending at all, and clamp his fingernails on Lexi’s temples.

‘I was kidnapped?’ she asked him, almost a murmur, as the purple mist once again began rolling out of his fingers.

‘Correct. You were kidnapped. By a pathetic creature. And there was never any real danger as he didn’t have the balls to hurt you. Or rape you. He just wanted to put you in a bathtub and wank over your unconscious body from ten yards away. We came and protected you, me and Mark. We put the weakling in the lake. Finished him. And Juana protected you, too, from those perverts at work. She took out their rotten, pervert brains. Stopped them dead. No one can touch you now, Lexi. You are safe with us.’

The last line was repeated, and seemingly echoed around the car, as the purple swirls gradually faded back into Nick’s hands.

‘Is she okay?’ I asked, getting an abrupt *shh* in response.

Lexi stared dead ahead, at the back of Juana’s seat, then turned to Nick and asked in her old, familiar voice, ‘why do I attract weirdos like this?’

‘Poor choice of location,’ replied Nick, climbing back into the driver’s seat and restarting the engine. ‘VR plazas tend to pull in those kind of reprobates.’

‘It never happened in Fresno.’

‘You must’ve looked lost here. Dazed. Easy target.’

Lexi looked at the palms of her hands, frowning, then the octopus logo on her blue sports vest. ‘I remember now. He complimented my top. Said it looked tight. That the octopus sign had nice tentacles. Then offered me a sip of the coffee he’d just bought.’

‘A common trick,’ said Nick, beeping the horn, presumably at a rogue animal on the road up ahead.

‘It had a brand on it...a logo. Next thing I know I’m in his car. Then we’re walking by a lake. Dizzy, couldn’t walk straight. He held out an arm and steadied me. Then I’m in a bathtub, cold...tired.’

I patted her shoulder as she talked even though there was no sense of pathos to what she was saying; it was more like someone trying to describe a filmn they’d watched when they were a kid. Whatever Nick’s purple mist had done differently this time, it was working.

‘It was weird, he took off my clothes...but closed his eyes as he was doing it. Said it was disrespectful to observe such things.’

Nick laughed, ragged. ‘Then started wanking over you two minutes later. Typical Reaganite.’

‘Typical male,’ edited Juana, turning round to Lexi again, only this time keeping her hand firmly on the back of the front seat. ‘If I’d been there, I would have eaten him. Ripped his whole head apart.’

‘Okay, don’t push it, Juana,’ said Nick, steering the car round another blue light corner. ‘Purple’s still stabilizing.’

‘She’s not okay?’ I asked.

‘I feel okay,’ replied Lexi.

‘She’ll be fine. Soon as we get a filmn playing.’

‘A filmn?’

‘Juana’s choice.’

‘Sorry, what?’

+++

Apparently, as punishment for her lapse in judgment at Kip’s Place, Juana was going to have to sleep on the couch – a very well-cushioned, big enough for a basketball player couch – and to balance the severity of that, she would get to choose what filmn we all watched before bed.

Naturally, she picked some obscure 80’s thing, but that didn’t bother me so much as the fact that Nick made Lexi and I sit either side of her.

‘It’s okay, she won’t bite.’

‘Not Lexi, no...’

‘Unless your hands start to wander. Dude, relax, you’re fine. She only eats guys who have it coming. With the odd exception now and then.’

‘Yeah, me.’

‘Dude, you half deserved it. That shoddy work ethic of yours. Don’t say *what*, it’s true. You’re like one of those old British construction companies, slow and missing half the time. Fucking useless.’ He coughed, probably as a way to bury his own tangent. ‘Anyway, she’ll be too busy watching the filmn to do anything. And you’ll be too busy watching to worry about it. *Kuso...House of Clocks*. Been a long time since I’ve seen that one.’

Despite his assurances [and insults], and the new *Fox with a giant carrot* cartoon hoodie Juana had on, both Lexi and I still tried to shift ourselves over to the far corners of the couch, eyes fixed about as tight as eyes could get on those wandering cannibal claws. However, each time we made it to our respective arm cushions, Nick raised a hand and, without any blue flash or musical cue, we were transported right back to the middle again.

Finally, after seven separate attempts, we both decided telepathically to just accept our fate and settled [at tilted angles] into the credits of *The House Of Clocks*.

‘It’s Fulci...’ whispered Juana to no one, as a *Twin Peaks* style melody played over still-frames of Renaissance statue heads, followed by names I’d never heard of, followed by blue mist cocooning an old mansion, eerily similar to the stuff they’d been pumping out over Kip’s pool, followed by an increasingly persistent and rhythmic ticking clock.

‘Okay, change of plan,’ said Nick, as the music faded and the first timepiece appeared.

‘You mean we can go to bed?’ I asked, giving out a reflex spasm as Juana’s leg brushed against mine.

‘Nope.’

‘The filmn’s starting,’ said Juana, moving her leg back.

‘Not anymore.’

The clock and the character with huge goggle glasses investigating it both vanished from the screen.

‘This filmn lacks current resonance...so I’m changing to something...a little better.’ As Nick spoke, various images came on the screen and departed again, with the last one being the intro scene from *Howl’s Moving Castle*. ‘Pay special attention to the Witch of the Waste character. Might help you lose some of that ridiculous stiffness you both have.’

I looked behind Juana’s head at Lexi, and guessed from her *in a vertical coffin* posture that I was pretty much a mirror of it.

‘What about my filmn?’ asked Juana, clearly missing the explanation.

‘Tomorrow night,’ replied Nick, putting a two fingers to his bottom lip and pointing at the screen on the wall.

Some aggrieved Spanish spluttered out, coupled with Juana stretching her arms and cracking what I guessed was her shoulder bone.

Expression on her face? Nothing.

Kuso...that didn’t hurt?

Were there even bones in there?

No one else seemed to notice or care, so I pulled my own arms in a bit tighter and focused on the Miyazaki piece. It had been less than a year since I’d last seen it, and that was with Charlie on the couch next to me. Wah, Charlie...I’d almost forgotten.

No...not almost.

I had forgotten. Dad too...Mum...all of them. Even the memory of it, watching the old woman traipse up the hill to Howl’s castle, the same scene that was on screen right now...didn’t feel real. Like it had happened in a dream instead of my actual living room. *My* living room. *My* TV. *My* sister...

‘The filmn, Keni,’ prodded Nick, looking over at me from the other chair.

I blinked, 90% automaton, and went back to the screen.

The old woman, who was really a cursed young sales girl, cleaned up the rooms of the castle and argued with a magical flame.

Japanese sounds came out of both characters and I understood all of it.

No need to even glance at the subtitles.

When we reached the famous steps scene - the Witch of the Waste having an asthma attack on the way up and the prematurely-old woman character sympathizing – Nick started adding his own commentary, telling us how this part in particular was relevant to Juana’s situation, even though she was far more attractive than the wasted witch.

‘Juana can walk up steps fine,’ responded Lexi, surprisingly blunt.

‘Metaphor, dude.’

‘She’s not physically falling apart either.’

‘Come on, don’t persist with it. You’ve had friends on methadone, Lexi. You know how it is.’

The line must’ve had some truth to it as Lexi’s face froze. *How the fuck did you know that* was what I expected to come out next, but instead she just shifted position, edging closer towards Juana.

‘We have a work in progress here...a friend who needs our patience and empathy. It’s up to all of us to keep an eye on her. Stop any more Kip moments from occurring.’

I wanted to say *friend? She tried to eat my brain*, but the passion wasn’t really strong enough to do it justice. The whole basement scene felt like it had happened weeks ago. And all I could see now was a stoned-looking Mexican in a slightly faded *fox with a carrot* hoodie.

‘Can’t you just alter her memory?’ I asked, settling for a soft alternative.

‘Not with base urges, no.’

‘It wouldn’t stick,’ added Juana, half turning to face me then quickly pulling back.

‘You mean it’s innate?’

‘Like eating and drinking. She can’t *not* do it. If she did...it’s done...skeleton time.’

I nodded out of habit, vetoing the inevitable follow up question: *would we have to find her more brains to eat?* I was pretty sure I knew the answer anyway.

‘What do you mean alter her memory?’ Lexi asked, bending down and peering at me from behind Juana’s neck.

‘Err...nothing.’

‘Is this like the thing he-...’ She stopped, looking at the screen, the Witch of the Waste entranced by the spinning, flickering shapes projected onto the wall. ‘Did that happen? In the car, before? But that’s-...it wouldn’t-...no, I remember being in a bathtub. There was a guy...a pervert wanking nearby. And Juana...you were asking me about LA...but there was blood on your cheeks...dripping down. I remember that happening too. No, it did happen. But you’re-...it’s normal now. The blood and the...that bathtub thing...’

She trailed off with body shivers, jerking all the way to the far side of the couch when Juana touched her on the arm.

‘Okay, this should be the last swirl,’ Nick said, pausing the filmn with his magic finger and coming over.

‘Why does she keep relapsing?’ I asked, standing up and instantly being pushed back down onto the couch by no one, an invisible force, as I tried to get across to Lexi.

‘I told you, incongruity.’

‘But...’

‘Sit still and let me work.’

It wasn’t a threat, but I did what he said anyway. Watched for the fifth or sixth time as the purple mist swirled around Lexi’s temples, hopeful that this time it could actually do its fucking job.

Whatever that was.

‘Right, let’s try and get a bit deeper, shall we? Nice and purple and nothing to be afraid of at all. Trust me., Lexitron.’

Nick ran through a new set of lines, explaining to Lexi directly that he was regulating her mind and helping her to accept things that most humans considered traumatic, and that the whole process was a good thing as long as she bought into it completely, understood that the bathtub scene and the basement murders had happened, and that any sudden feelings of displacement were completely normal, encouraged even.

‘All part of the recovery journey,’ he finished, pulling both hands away and stepping back.

Lexi kept her eyes fixed on the wall screen for a while, minutes perhaps, then finally looked up at Nick. ‘You’ve altered my mind.’

‘Adjusted.’

‘To help me.’

‘Yes. That’s better. Good.’

She touched her head tentatively, as if expecting an open wound. ‘What are you?’

‘Hmm. Very good.’

‘A wizard?’

‘Ha, you could say that. Though you humans usually prefer a supernatural ontology for that, not what I am.’

‘Which is?’

‘In one digestible word...alien.’

‘Alien...’

‘Well repeated. No, no follow-ups. Mark will fill you in on the rest.’ Nick clapped his hands together, wiping the filmn off the screen behind him. ‘Now it’s time for bed. Busy day of recuperation tomorrow. Gonna take you guys to see the lady of the lake. Very exciting. Juana, I’ll get you a blanket and some pillows.’

‘And my filmn?’ the Mexican asked.

‘That too.’

+++

With little fanfare, Nick corralled both me and Lexi upstairs and into one of the bedrooms I'd explored earlier that morning.

Only now it had a huge, king-sized bed, a study desk, a copy of *Moon Prison*, and posters of erotic sex movies plastered all over the walls. I was no expert, but I recognized most of them. *Story of O*. *9 Songs*. *Caligula*. *Sex And Zen 4D*. *Betty Blue*. *Betty Bluer*. *Betty Bluest*. *Uranus Hypno Grab*. Each image either full-frontal nudity or blunt penetration shot.

'See if you can help each other unwind,' Nick said with a wink, exiting swiftly and closing the door behind him.

There was a locking sound too.

Then an unlocking sound.

'Joking,' came from the other side of the door.

'Okay,' I said, looking around the room, clasping my hands together, flinching at Bobby Cho's gigantic dick on the wall opposite.

'Nice room,' said Lexi, pulling the *Salifa X* jacket over her head and dumping it on the floor.

If nothing else weird had happened that day, it may have been awkward, but as Nick had just told Lexi he was an alien, it wasn't too bad. Even taking off our clothes in front of each other felt normal.

'How is he an alien if he's a movie star?' was her first question as she lifted up the blanket and flicked away the pack of condoms lying on the sheets. Then, when I looked stuck, a more precise one: 'and where does he come from? Which planet?'

'I have no idea.'

'He didn't tell you?'

'I asked, but he evaded...changed the topic to something else.'

'And why does he look like Nick Stahl?'

‘Don’t know. A disguise, I guess. The real one’s in a bucket in his room...comatose.’

‘A bucket?’

‘Some kind of storage method. I really don’t know. I just walked in, saw it and...yeah. Nick Stahl in a bucket, out cold.’

She shifted towards me as I entered the bed, reaching out an arm and putting it over my stomach.

‘You think he might be lying? About the alien part?’

‘Don’t know. I doubt it.’

‘Maybe it’s all some kind of hypnotism trick.’

‘Could be.’

She moved her leg across, using her knee to rub against my thigh. ‘He made you think you saw Nick Stahl in a bucket, but really...’

‘He does know how to mess with people’s minds,’ I continued, moving my hand down to her waist. ‘And make us remember things differently. Beyond that...I don’t know.’

‘Err...okay. So when he said you could fill me in...’

I laughed, shifting my legs away as her knee moved up onto my dick. ‘Yeah, I’m not sure where he got that idea. If anything, questions seem to make him more annoyed. Or they did when I asked them.’

‘He is a weird guy...’

‘Capricious, too.’

Lexi’s knee retreated, replaced by her hand, which rubbed along the surface of my pants a few times before slipping inside.

‘You want to...’ I half asked.

‘If the parts are willing,’ she said, lifting up the stem of my barely conscious dick and tracing her fingernail down from the tip.

I coasted through the scenes of our previous fucks, moving my own hands over her body, across her breasts, down between her thighs, but nothing seemed to get any blood flowing.

‘It’s been a pretty long day,’ I said, putting a failed hand out to stop her as she moved her head down past my stomach.

‘Give me thirty seconds,’ she replied, pulling the tip to her tongue.

The touch of her should’ve provoked something, but...nothing.

Not even a reflex spasm.

And my armpits were beginning to sweat.

I want to fuck my girlfriend.

Want to fuck Lexi.

Want to put my dick inside her cunt and watch it go in and out and

Wanna fuck her down into the mattress, through the headboard, through the Caligula poster, all the way inside her-

It was no good, all the commands were dry ink.

Monochrome perversion.

Thing inside a thing spurting out a thing.

Watched by things.

Kuso...

Out of desperation, I looked at the walls, the posters of actors fake-fucking, Bobby Cho leering at Jenna Saturn’s clit, Ann K and Sybil Danning locked together on a rowing boat, but the framing was too austere, the outline of the edge of the image telling me in shark words THIS IS NOT A REAL FUCK.

‘I need a break,’ she said, abruptly dropping my dick where she found it and pulling herself back up to the pillow.

‘That party,’ I said, stroking her arm. ‘All the weird pool shit...I think it’s messing with us.’

‘Yeah, probably.’

‘We should get some sleep.’

'Right.'

I stroked her arm a while longer then pulled away. The faint sounds of Juana's film drifted up through the floor. The electronic organ melody. We both lay on our backs, staring up at the higher parts of the wall.

Lexi in the bathtub.

Hanging off my shoulder.

Punching the pool party perv.

Stabbing the Kontolian cosplayer in the calf.

Putting me in her mouth.

None of it did anything.

How?

I turned and looked at her again, at the side of her face, then down at her chest. Then back at her face again.

She pretended not to notice at first, then reached down for my hand and smiled, her eyes still on the walls.

'These posters don't fucking help much, do they?'



‘Didn’t fucking wait for me,’ Sadia wailed, throwing another video case at my head

picking up the next one

shadow guy rowing the boat on her behalf

and all I could say back was,

‘you didn’t wait for me either,’

then,

‘you’re really fucking this shadow guy?’

then,

‘Portland, that shithole?’

The words may as well as have been medieval Urdu with

Critters 3 hitting me on the neck

and clipping Lexi on the hand as she tried to climb back into the boat

Tenebrae jacket soaked through

eyes flared witch-purple.

‘Don’t even like her,’ I whined, helping her in, another video sailing over my head,

‘that’s why her face is so vague, so hazy, I don’t even remem-...

+++

Eyes wide open

wide shut

open.

The environment re-assembled itself, without sound.

Ah, Nick’s place. Lake Arrowhead. Architectural mishmash. Aliens and lunatics in VR hoodies, copies of copies in ice buckets.

I hung one leg out of bed, rubbed my eyelids, sharpened the wall opposite.

Alenka Unk’s muff stared back at me.

Tammy Takahashi’s tits on the next poster along.

Hand went down, reflex, getting a good grip.

A few strokes.

Fingertips at the top.

Fingernails.

Nothing.

Fuck, not even here.

On a bed surrounded by sex.

I pulled my hand back up and assessed. Most of the duvet was bunched to the left, over Lexi’s top half, while a few wisps of unkempt hair had glued themselves to the side of her cheek.

She must’ve realized I was observing her as the duvet was suddenly dragged up over her face.

Ha, autopilot defence.

I wanted to pull the duvet back down and kiss her, but that would wake her up, and I wasn’t ready for that right now, not with things the way they were.

Post-dream sex, Lexi, with a floppy piece of rubber?

Boa sorte.

Swinging my other leg off the bed, I put on my pants and the generic *Planet Dark* t-shirt laid out on the chair, then my *Damijana Chu* hoodie, then headed quietly out into the corridor.

+++

The kitchen was just how I'd left it the day before...apart from the sepia-tone paintings of Lake Arrowhead on the back wall, the four stools next to the high table, the bread and fruit stacked in two large bowls, and the insane amount of sunlight that was being soaked in by the windows, which themselves seemed somehow larger, too.

'Alien magic,' I muttered, taking a carton of cranberry juice out from the fridge, checking the expiry date and emptying almost all of it into the *Arrowhead Boat Tours* glass [also new].

Maybe Nick can do something for my libido.

A few friendly tendrils of purple mist.

Or refill this juice can at least.

I took a sip, not really expecting much, but then quickly realized my left hand was planted on my crotch.

Rise, you wretch.

For Lexi's sake.

Before she starts fucking someone else.

A brief image of Nick with one hand on her waist and an eleven inch dick slipping in from behind coalesced inside my brain and was excised instantaneously.

No, he wouldn't.

He's basically asexual.

No interest in women at all.

I sipped more of my juice, looking at some of the sepia lake-scapes on the wall. Luckily, my hands were both on the table as Lexi appeared from a portal behind me, or possibly a regular doorway, and asked if there was any more juice.

‘Give me a sec,’ I said, getting up and walking over to the fridge.

‘Wah, he’s got fruit and bread too.’

‘Yup.’

‘Thank gods, I’m starving. Serious, my stomach is growling. You been down here long?’

‘About ten minutes.’ I grabbed a second *Arrowhead* promo glass and poured out the cranberry juice in front of her. ‘Enough?’

‘Half okay.’

‘Too late.’

She took the glass and drank a third of it in one go. Then grabbed a pear from the bowl, rotated it, squinted at a brown patch, and started throwing it up and down. ‘Had a quick peek in the living room. Juana’s buried under the blanket, no movement at all.’

‘Too early to eat brains, I guess.’

‘Kinda surprised she’s still here, actually. Half expected her to take Nick’s car and drive back to Fresno.’

‘She wouldn’t get very far.’

‘Probably not.’

‘I would never steal someone else’s car,’ cut in the Mexican herself, walking past the island table with bare legs and a dress-length *Active Koala* t-shirt, stopping in confusion by the patio screen door, shielding her eyes from the sun, then coming back and pulling out the stool next to her favourite employee.

‘Immersion haze?’ asked Lexi, throwing the pear up again.

‘Tired.’

‘Must be tough sleeping on a couch. Especially a stranger’s.’

Juana stared off at one of the paintings, left hand detangling a stubborn clump of knotted hair...then the gears kicked in again and she whispered, 'si.'

Ha, *tired* was right. In a weird way, she reminded me of Asami. The casual meandering style, the messed-up hair, the complete disinterest in what anyone thought about it, out of sync replies, bizarro head tilts towards the floor.

I got up and grabbed another glass, pouring out a giant shot of cranberry juice.

'Mine?' asked Juana, when I placed it down next to her hand.

'Sii.'

'*Arigato.*'

'Doesn't mean I forgive you for trying to eat my brain.'

'Hmm.'

'Or that I ever will.'

'*Un futuro verde pálido.*'

'Sorry?'

She muttered a little bit more in Spanish, then a little bit more, then something related to Kip, then nodded to the glass as if she needed permission to coil her fingers round it. Which she did anyway.

'What about me?' asked Nick, materializing out of pale white air over by the patio screen door, back against the sunlight, arms folded.

'Wah...where did-...'

'No need for gasps, just the house owner returning from the swamp. Good to see you were rude enough to start eating my shit without me.'

'Sorry, I thought it was...' started Lexi, holding up the pear, glancing with Stasi eyes in my direction.

'Relax, I'm not angry. In fact, complete transparency, I put all that stuff in the bowl earlier this morning. Complimentary breakfast for my treasured guests.'

Lexi gave Nick a few seconds of Gena Rowlands face then mumbled something, possibly in Portuguese, and went back to playing catch with her pear.

'You've been out already?' I asked, puzzled.

‘Several times.’

‘But it’s...half eight.’

‘To a Lake Arrowhead resident that’s like midday. How about pouring some juice, Keni?’

‘Must be your alien stamina,’ said Lexi, leaning back on the stool, switching from pear to the juice glass.

‘Ah, host ontology out in the open, very good.’ Nick came over to the stool and tapped the table with two fingers as I poured out some juice for him. ‘How was the bed? Big enough for two?’

Lexi let out a not so quiet *weirdo* then went over to the sink, running some water over her pear.

‘Comfortable mattress?’ prodded Nick.

‘The bed was fine,’ I replied, pushing the glass against his hand.

‘And the décor?’

I coughed, not even close to convincing. ‘Very subtle.’

‘Ha, to be honest, I haven’t seen any of those movies. Just thought it would help to stimulate things for the two of you...your own little adventures.’

Lexi stayed by the sink, biting into the pear.

I returned to my stool.

Both of us eventually ran out of figurative shadow to hide in and drifted over to the paintings instead.

‘Okay, your business, love monkeys.’ Nick took half of his cranberry juice then grabbed a slice of bread, folding it and eating it raw. When he was done chewing, he gestured with his wrist towards the seat outside on the patio. ‘It’s gonna be hot out today, and we’re probably gonna end up swimming in the lake at some point, so I’ve put bikinis out for you two ladies. Fresh t-shirts as well. Keni, you’ve got a choice between shorts and a sarong. Oh, and a yellow scuba diving suit.’

‘I’ll keep what I have on, thanks.’

‘Traditionalism, fine. Juana, you should still be stable for a day or two, no need to pick anyone up yet. Though if we do happen to come across a good candidate...’

‘I can control myself,’ finished Juana, taking a yellow apple, biting off a tiny chunk.

‘Good. Then we’re all set. Twenty minutes for breakfast and we go. Okay?’

‘And if we wanna go home?’ asked Lexi, picking a nail into the brown patch of the pear.

‘Ha, no one’s that dense.’

‘If we insist...’

‘This is Lake Arrowhead, Lexirella. Absorb it. Let it pleasure you.’

Lexi took another bite of the pear, looking over at me. I didn’t have anything to chew on so I sipped up froth residue from the surface of my juice.

Was she expecting back up?

Agreement?

Maybe not, as she quickly floated off to the paintings, leaving me with my glass and the ambush thought of her in a bikini, surrounded by other men...and my dick on a rack in the dungeon, lifeless, not even worth summoning Lavinia for.

+++

The first location on Nick’s completely undemocratic itinerary was the Lady in the Lake.

Not a surprise, really, as he’d been pimping it since I’d first trespassed into his house the day before.

It wasn’t that far either; just past the main promenade on the other side of the lake. And, as it was still early, the roads were clear, which made the drive over quite relaxing.

‘All the perverts must be sleeping,’ said Lexi, sitting in the back with Juana, both with anime t-shirts over their bikinis [*Wicked City Spider Demon* for the Mexican, *Xxun*

the Neutrino Alchemist [from the travesty that was the *Beyond the Rabbit Hole anime spin-off*] for Lexi], while I hung my arm out of the passenger side window.

‘Boating, more likely,’ replied Nick, pointing out at the lake.

‘What, all of them?’

‘I don’t see many,’ replied Juana, putting her face out into the passing breeze.

‘Me neither.’

Nick leaned left, taking the car with him. ‘Ah, you’re right. There’s usually more. Must be an event happening out of town somewhere.’

‘Or they’re sleeping,’ repeated Lexi, her tone this time a lot more caustic.

I looked at her through the windscreen mirror, trying to subtly shake my head as a warning to dial down the fire. Then I saw her [and Xxun] glare back and remembered my fist slamming into Nick’s face the previous day.

Okay, maybe a bit of fire was okay.

In controlled bursts.

The car pulled off onto a small road that ran closer to the lake, and a minute later, came to a weirdly staggered stop in a makeshift car park, which appeared to have only one other car.

‘Almost time for the corpse,’ Nick said, jumping out of the driver’s side, pulling the seat back to let Juana out.

‘Sounds weird,’ said Lexi, getting out on my side and instantly putting her hand over her eyes to block out the interrogator sun.

‘Come on, quickly.’

‘Doesn’t it?’

‘What?’ I asked, peeling off my Damijana Chu hoodie.

‘Sound weird.’

‘A bit, yeah.’

‘But we’re still going down there to see it?’

‘Seems like it.’

‘It’s okay,’ said Juana, sliding between us, tugging on the bottom of Lexi’s anime t-shirt. ‘Replica dead bodies are never as bad as the real thing.’

‘Great.’

‘Unless they’re done by Screaming Mad George.’

‘Not as bad. Right. Mad what?’

The Mexican opened her mouth to explain, but was cut off by a yell from the other side of the car park.

‘You glued to the fucking concrete or what?’ Nick dropped his arms, punctuating his line with a slap to the bonnet of someone else’s car. ‘We’re gonna miss the fucking thing.’

‘Moving,’ I replied, doing my own tug on Lexi’s t-shirt.

‘Do we really have to do this?’

‘Yes.’

‘Can’t we just wait here by the car?’

‘No.’

‘Juana?’

I put a hand up blocking the Mexican’s attempted reply, and tugged harder on Lexi’s t-shirt. ‘Come on, before he goes nova.’

+++

With the sun stockpiling heat death above, and Lake Arrowhead doing fuck all to stop it, Nick guided the three of us down a well-manicured path, past a tacky sign that said ‘LADY IN THE LAKE – 50M’ and onto a small pier that had a family of three at the end, the dad taking pictures of wife and daughter next to a holo-board of the infamous corpse.

When we got close, I could hear that they weren’t speaking English...in fact, it sounded a bit like Portuguese.

I nudged Lexi and whispered, ‘practice time,’ but she ignored me, turning to Nick instead and asking when the dead body was going to rise up.

‘Any second now...’

‘I’m sweating,’ said Juana, taking off her *Spider Demon* t-shirt and draping it like an towel over her head. Then fixing the back strap on a bikini that Nick swore was the same one Isabella Adjani wore in *One Deadly Summer* [a clever boast as neither I nor Lexi had heard of it].

Lexi’s bikini, on the other hand, was a simulacrum of the white piece from *Coffy*, a filmn most younger people knew from the remake, though, despite the insane heat, she wasn’t showing much of it at the moment.

Too shy maybe?

Attached to the *Xxun* t-shirt?

Or still feeling some trace trauma from the Reagan incident?

If *incident* was a strong enough word?

Didn’t feel like it...

Somewhere on the boards of the pier, a beeping sound commenced, followed by an announcement that the lady was about to appear.

I half-focused on the spot of water Nick was pointing at while the remainder, the pervert half, covertly glanced at the side of Juana’s vermilion bikini. Then the tattoo on her neck that I’d never noticed before...*Nadja ja ja* in a neo-gothic font. Then the side of her bikini again.

Don’t look at the slope, don’t search for the nipple.

Lexi, Lexi, Lexi, Lexi...

I looked at the slope, the underside curve.

Stared at the vermilion.

Formulated scenarios.

Cut out clothes, history, basement insanity.

Painted in sex.

The lunatic who'd tried to devour my brain...bouncing gently up and down on my lap with a giant spoon in her hand...explaining the tattoo...downplaying the feast...insisting with radium yellow eyes that fucking her while slowly having my brain consumed was the only way to feel hard again.

Nope.

Still didn't work.

The darkness of it...the void-desperation...should've had some effect, but...nothing. Just the object-weirdness of a topless Mexican demon tapping my head with a spoon...no pubic hair...hospital room tits...dick on a flesh-coloured mortuary slab.

'The water, Keni,' said Nick, patting me on the waist.

I blinked and re-adjusted.

He was right, something was happening.

Something abject.

At least that was my prediction.

I continued watching, counting the ripples.

A few more seconds and a tangled lump of seaweed emerged onto the surface of the lake, then a mop of dark-rooted blonde hair, then a grey-white face that, when I first caught sight of it, genuinely looked like it belonged to a real person.

'Fucking hell...,' I mumbled, a little too loud.

'Wah, she's naked,' added Lexi, glancing at the family nearby, who seemed to have no problem with their kid watching all this.

'Like Ophelia,' said Juana, lifting her t-shirt a little off her head.

After about a minute of bobbing in controlled circles, the corpse's mouth opened and an eel-like fish swam out. It circled around the dummy's head a few times then vanished back between the yellowing teeth.

'That was pretty bleak,' said Lexi as we returned to the car, the sleeves of her *Xxun the Neutrino Alchemist* t-shirt rolled up onto her shoulders.

‘Impressively so,’ added Juana, scratching at the skin around her *Nadja ja ja* tattoo.

‘Seriously?’

‘The detail of the eel...coming out of the mouth...living inside there.’

‘You liked that part?’

‘Bit bit bit.’

‘Nah, it was much better before,’ countered Nick, several steps ahead of us all, car keys already in hand. ‘More authentic. The hair on the corpse...they’ve dyed it blonde now, made it less coarse...taken her nightdress off too. Probably under pressure from all those sleazes on the local council. Bunch of fucking troglodytes.’

‘It did look pretty realistic,’ I said, veering left to the passenger side as the car appeared ahead of us.

‘That’s cos you’ve got no comparison point. And no expertise in dummy-making.’

‘Err...I guess not.’

‘Do you?’ asked Lexi, coming round to my side of the car.

‘A lifetime’s worth.’

‘Seriously?’

‘I never lie when it comes to prosthetics.’ Nick opened the driver’s door and pulled up the seat, letting Juana climb in. ‘Might as well hit Able Bridge next. Check out the waterfall, walk around a bit...then come back for some lunch. Okay?’

‘The lunch part sounds good,’ I said, pushing the seat down after Lexi who laughed as she settled back in.

‘You’ve just eaten breakfast.’

‘Half a slice of bread.’

‘That’s your own fault, dude. Too cautious.’ Nick started the car and pulled back out onto the small road. ‘You too, Lexi. Still hiding that beautiful Pam Grier bikini I gifted you.’

‘I’m not your personal model. Sorry.’

‘No, but you’re gonna be a pool of sweat if you’re still wearing it past midday.’

‘I feel fine.’

‘Okay. But if Keni takes his t-shirt off...’

‘Mark,’ I cut in, correcting him.

‘...and I take mine off, then it’s just you left. Mark, Keni, same thing.’

Lexi rolled down her t-shirt sleeves, dusted off imaginary bits from Xunn’s anime face. ‘Why do you call him Keni all the time?’

‘Odd question.’

‘Why though?’

‘Easy. It’s his name.’

‘Huh? No, it isn’t. It’s Mark.’ Lexi leaned forward into the back of the front passenger seat, looking at me through the windscreen mirror. ‘Right?’

‘Well...actually, it’s-...’

‘Dude, don’t say *long story*. You were Japanese, got your brain switched with a Scouse guy, kept your face, now you’re fifty times more interesting. Or you would be if you ever took the handbrake off.’

‘Err...’ I turned to the backseat and saw two faces carved from stone staring back at me. ‘It’s mostly true. Some of it.’

‘You got your brain switched...’ tried Lexi, glancing at Juana, whose eyes were now clamped to my forehead.

‘No...not physically...’

‘Altered?’

‘Yeah. Kind of.’

‘There are two brains inside you...’ the Mexican cannibal said, reaching out a shaky hand towards my scalp.

‘Hey, I’m not a museum piece. Or caviar.’ I swiped backwards at her claw, stopping it temporarily. ‘And don’t keep copying everything this guy says. I’m Mark, not Keni. That’s my real name.’

Lexi mouthed a drawn out *okay, Mark* and put out a hand to guide Juana's arm back down to her lap. 'I'll let you explain it to me later. Without the alien around.'

Nick laughed, beeping the horn for no apparent reason.

'I'll try,' I said, looking down at the stern *Neutrino Alchemist* face on her t-shirt.

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After spending an hour hiking out to Able Bridge, ten minutes listening to Nick complain about its poor restoration work, and another hour hiking back, we'd finally drained enough of our energy reserves to go for lunch.

Remembering the waitress from the day before, and Nick's odd reaction to her, I suggested the same place, but was quickly overruled by our leader in chief, who stressed an urgent need to eat Hainan chicken at *Gai-Father*.

'Where?'

'That place,' he answered, opening the car door and pointing across the main road. 'The one with the garish yellow sign.'

'Looks weird,' muttered Lexi, frowning at the scholar chicken logo.

'Yeah, but the food's good. And it gives me a chance to show off my Mandarin.'

'You know how to speak Chinese?'

'Just watch.'

We did as instructed, Lexi and I taking one side of the cherry-wood table, Juana [with her *Spider Demon* t-shirt now hanging off her shoulder] snug in the window corner, and Nick practically hanging off the edge of the bench, waving the menu in the air. It took a few minutes for him to get attention as the place was quite full, the Lake Arrowheaders having apparently found their way out of their beds, but he finally managed to reel someone in.

'... ..'

'Four?' asked the Chinese waiter in the *Gai-Father* cap, holding up fingers.

'... ..'

'No bones?'

'... ..'

'Drink?'

'... ..'

The waiter nodded and pushed a few more buttons on his chicken-shaped pad. Then gestured at the number that popped up on the end of the table.

'See how he only replied in English,' said Nick, when the waiter was out of earshot. 'That means my Mandarin is shit.'

Lexi burst out a scattershot laugh, quickly turning it into a cough.

'Not as shit as most celebs, he could still understand my basic order, but...not good enough for him to switch. Which is why I like this place. Yeah, Keni, don't look all Shelley Duvall, I'm a modest guy when the moment calls for it.'

'I didn't say anything.'

'Dude, it was graffitied on your face.'

'Was it?'

'Hey, you called him Keni again,' interrupted Lexi, taking a sip from the glass the waiter had just left in front of her.

'I wouldn't drink too much of that,' replied Nick, nodding at the water.

'Why not?'

'Two dollars a shot. One point seven five if you live here.'

Lexi stopped, spitting some of what she'd already taken back into the glass.

'Too late, it's already on the table.'

'Two dollars for water?'

'From the tap probably. Don't blame *Gai-Father*, it's everywhere around here. Lake Arrowhead economics. Wait till we hit the western shore.'

'You mean you have to pay to swim?' I asked, confused.

'Swim, sit on the benches, walk on the sand, walk on VIP sand. Gotta watch the boundary line for that one, it's quite sneaky.' He paused as the waiter came back over, trying out some more Mandarin. Just like before, the Chinese guy stuck pretty tightly

to English, though he did add something in his native language at the end. 'Wah, he just lied to my face...said I had some improvement. Nice fucking guy.'

'You don't sound that bad,' I said, picking up a salt shaker with a smiling chicken on top and shaking it.

'Thank you, Mr. Sichuan. But I'm not gonna do what those lying actors do and pretend I know something I don't. You ever catch Jordi Wallace's Cantonese attempt? Fucking awful, incomprehensible. Yet his character in the film says he's fluent.'

'Same with Spanish,' said Juana, scrunching up her t-shirt and using it as a cushion against the restaurant window.

'They lie too?'

'Constantly.'

'Motherfuckers...'

'Sometimes it's so bad I don't even know it's Spanish they're speaking. Or trying to speak.'

'... ..' said Nick, in what sounded like it might be a Spanish accent.

'What?'

'Exactly. Shit in Chinese, shit in Spanish. The only ones I'm actually fluent in are Japanese and Russian. And English, obviously.'

Lexi stopped examining her two-dollar glass of water and looked at him. 'How *do* you know English?'

'Dude...'

'I mean, if you're an alien...how did you learn it?'

'Ah, back in the forum.'

'Wah, I never thought about asking that,' I said, looking at Lexi's hand on the rip-off water. 'Good question.'

'Typical Keni, easily impressed. Sorry. Mark. Mar-ku. A good solid, Japanese name that one.'

'Is there an answer?'

He looked off towards the back of the restaurant, then at the VR promo screen to the left. Immersive Hainan vacations were apparently a stick's throw away at the Lake Arrowhead VR resort, which itself was only a short walk from the main VR plaza. Both so attractive that Nick didn't bother coming back.

After a full minute, I coughed, then repeated my question.

'Answer?' he replied, spinning back round. 'Of course. The purple. Embedded it when I first came here.'

'Which was when?' asked Lexi, lifting the glass up to her lips...then saying *fuck* and putting it right back down again.

'Could add other languages, if I wanted to, but that would be cheating. When? Before you were all born. Juana too, I suspect. Though I'm not a hundred per cent on that yet. Ah, chicken's here. Good timing.'

The waiter put four plates of yellow-skinned chicken and rice on the table, plus two little dishes of dark sauce, then did covert Tsukubashi eyes when Lexi asked Nick directly which planet he was from.

'... ..' explained Nick, patting the confused guy on the waist, pushing him back towards the counter.

'What did you say to him?' I asked, watching the waiter bump into another customer's table.

'Told him Lexi's afraid of taking her t-shirt off.'

'Fuck off...' came out of Lexi's mouth, I guess before she could stop it. Then it came out again when Nick leaned across and tried to pick at her collar.

'Come on...for Pam Grier's sake.'

'Which planet are you from?' she asked again, swerving away from his grip, almost knocking over her water.

'Ah, careful...' laughed Nick, giving up on the t-shirt attack and settling back into his seat. 'How about this meal? Looks pretty special, ne?'

'Which planet are you from?'

'Don't forget to dip it in the sauce. Juana, you eating?'

Lexi leaned forward, blocking Juana's face with her left hand. 'Which planet are you from?'

'She didn't even open her mouth yet.'

'Which planet...are you from?'

'Okay, Lexirella. Just so that we can finish our meal. I'm from Triton.'

'The moon?'

Nick paused, chopsticks gripped against two chunks of chicken. 'I did not pin you for astrophysics knowledge.'

'I've played *Pluto 2270*. Triton is one of the bases.'

'Fuck...VR cheat. Should've known.'

'You actually come from there?' I asked, ignoring my own plate of food and tagging in.

'You didn't play that trash too, did you?' he asked, turning to Juana.

'I have no interest in VR.'

'Good response.'

'Wait...if you're from Triton,' continued Lexi, looking out onto the main road outside, the corner of the VR building just about visible, 'what about the rest of your kind? Are they living there too?'

'Were you actually born on Triton?' I added, finally picking up one of the chopsticks.

Nick looked back at us both, guiding the two chunks of chicken slowly into his barely open mouth. Then scanned the tables behind.

'You know, Juana, I think that guy might be checking you out.'

'*Que?*'

'Must be your bikini.'

'Which guy?'

Juana pulled away from her window cave and searched over and around Lexi's head. As the Triton question was seemingly dead in an alley, I turned and searched too.

Nick was right...but wrong too.

It wasn't just a random guy, it was B-list movie prop, Andi Chopra. Star of *Halt Vacation 2* and *Pluto Fear*, the film I'd watched just a few weeks ago. Or months. Possessor of iconic *velvet-bobo* hair. Rumoured ex-girlfriend beater. And, for some reason, this shittiest of shit actors was here in *Gai Father*, staring at Juana as if she had...as if she were his long, lost Ondōan love.

'First brain-eating candidate perhaps,' said Nick, finishing off another chunk of chicken. 'Re-usable hair too. Very luxurious.'

'Not interested,' answered Juana, slouching back down against the window and draping the t-shirt over her vermilion bikini.

'Ah, discipline. Good girl.'

'He's too well-known.'

'Rationalism. Even better.'

Nick picked up a clump of chicken-oil rice and looked at Lexi, nodding along to a ghost melody.

She stared back, chopsticks untouched.

'Are there other aliens on Triton?' she asked, finally.

His eyes switched purple. 'You should really make a run on the chicken. Best you'll find outside of Hainan.'

'Do they live there too?'

'Rice is passable.'

'Or are they here, near this lake?'

'I assume you know how to use chopsticks.'

Lexi sucked in a cosmonaut's breath and released it slowly as I put a hand on her arm. 'We'll ask him again later,' I whispered into her neck.

'From the comfort of the dungeon rack,' supplemented Nick, eyes returning to their normal colour.

'When he's less playful.' I moved my hand down onto her palm, rubbing it softly. 'Lexi?'

'Like talking to a fucking stick,' she muttered, picking up the optional fork by the salt shaker and stabbing it into a piece of no-sauce chicken.



On the short drive to the western shore of Lake Arrowhead, I reeled back the Jeff Fahey books I'd looked at what seemed like months ago now, vaguely remembering a line he had about the resorts near LA: *like VR within VR within a psychopath's thalamus*.

I didn't know what he meant at the time...didn't even know what a thalamus was...but as we approached the first of three payment gates next to a fairly typical lakeside beach, I began to get an idea.

'This one's for general access,' explained Nick, taking out his Arrowhead Residential Card and swiping it against the scan-pole. 'Next one's beach and swim, last one's VIP. Don't worry, Nick Stahl the local movie star can cover all of us.'

I was pretty sure none of us had our wallets, so if he couldn't cover us then it would've been a short session. Nevertheless, we all said thanks and followed him onto the insanely smooth [and imported] sand.

The area itself – or the beach and swim section that Nick stopped us at - was around half capacity, with most people stretched out on the sun loungers, and the younger, sexier ones frolicking in the lake. Unlike the beaches in Japan, there was no

net sealing off the swimming area, which meant you could pretty much swim as far out as you liked, to the other side of the lake if you had the stamina.

Maybe Nick was capable of such a feat, using his alien physiology?

Or maybe he couldn't even swim?

I thought of asking him as he picked out a spot on the sand, but then Lexi took off her *Xxun Alchemist* t-shirt and my mind cut elsewhere. Back to the dungeon of *Nightmare Castle*. The couch in the video caffè. Her bedroom. Sadia's bedroom. The tree outside. Sadia's burning house poem. The swimming pool in Compton. Syria touching herself under the surface, blood dripping off my knuckles.

'The old Id finally hacking off the hinges...' said Nick, yanking myself and the *Planet Dark* t-shirt back to the beach.

'What?'

'Lexi's t-shirt is off.'

So? came out as a mechanical hum, my eyes still with the Pam Grier substitute, her *Coffy* bikini...

'I'm going into the water,' she whispered into my neck, brushing a hand against the bottom of my shorts. 'You coming?'

'In a minute.'

'Juana?'

'*Más tarde*'

Lexi looked at Nick, then at the people splashing around in the lake. I followed her gaze. There was enough space in the water to slip into without being hassled by anyone, and all the people splashing around seemed to be in a group already so...not too bad.

Unless she wanted to be hassled?

It was a paranoid question and died quickly as I watched her stroll down to the lake's edge, kicking some water at one of the wave-creating bots bobbing in the shallows at the side.

For some reason, that made me laugh. Splashing water at a bot. Why?

I turned back to the non-human pair, still smiling.

‘Ah, your new fan is trailing you,’ Nick said, taking off his own t-shirt to reveal a body that could in no way have been worked towards. Not with the lifestyle I’d witnessed. That purple swirly shit had probably made the abs for him...and those triceps...

‘I will not talk to him,’ answered Juana, *Spider Demon* t-shirt already over her face as she lay, legs coiled-up, on the sand.

Their exchange pinballed around my brain a few times before I finally realized what they were referring to. Walking languidly towards the VIP area was *Gai Father* stalker Andi Chopra, baggy white shirt spotted with sweat, sunglasses honed in on Juana’s vermilion bikini.

‘He’ll keep coming,’ said Nick, picking up some powdery sand and rubbing it on his arms.

‘Don’t care.’

‘Twenty minutes...then he’ll stockpile enough ego to come and talk to you.’

‘No problem, I’ll answer in Spanish.’

‘He might speak that too.’

‘Then I’ll use Yaqui.’

Nick laughed, reaching over and tickling Juana’s *Nadja ja ja* tattoo. Then ruffling the rogue strands of hair sticking out from under her makeshift blanket when she told him to fuck off.

‘Is that a language?’ I asked, sitting down next to Lexi’s t-shirt, then switching quickly to an innocuous spot on the sand as Juana turned to face me.

‘*Si, claro.* My native tongue.’

‘From Mexico?’

‘*Si.* You can say that.’

I scratched a couple of times at the space station on my t-shirt, then scooped up a handful of sand, nodding. *So you were human at some point?* was what I really wanted to ask, followed by *why are you still using Spanish*, but that would undo the cranberry juice

moment we'd had earlier and, for some reason, my brain was telling me, don't undo it, don't undo it.

Why?

Did I like her in some way?

Was she my new surrogate mum?

But...the red bikini, the *Spider Demon* t-shirt...her cannibal flesh...

A suicide fuck?

The only way to jumpstart my evaporating, conked-out sex drive?

Juana...

Abstract Yaqui Juana...

Monster...

I let the sand trickle out of my fist, imagining it as brain dust.

Nearby, a toddler screamed out as someone's dog stepped on their sandcastle, getting an uncomfortably loud *build a-fucking-nother one* from the guy next to them.

'Looks like you're being usurped, Keni-cat,' said Nick, brushing the sand he'd just sprinkled on back off his arms.

My face feigned confusion despite, instinctively, knowing what he meant.

'In the water.'

I dropped the pretense and turned, scanning for a few seconds before zooming in on Lexi. She was up to her thighs, riding infant waves, flanked by two stripped guys on either side. One pink-white, the other Japanese.

'She's a grown adult,' I replied, scratching the space station again.

'As opposed to a non-grown one?'

'Funny.'

'You better get that t-shirt off and get over there. The Japanese guy's getting quite close. Could hijack your novelty factor.'

I patted my stomach, still feeling quite stuffed from the Hainan chicken.

'Just breathe in,' said Nick, reading my pretty blatant body language. 'No one will notice.'

‘You think?’

‘Breathe is right,’ added Juana, removing half the t-shirt from her face and squinting up. ‘Relax another minute, wait for Lexi to get rid of them.’

‘Too late, the Japanese guy’s already stroking her arm.’

I looked at the water again, scrunching up the bottom of my t-shirt as Lexi stood there and let the Japanese guy with his fairly well-built physique brush something off her shoulder. At least that’s what I hoped he was doing.

‘Lake Arrowhead bravado, Keni. These people are used to getting what they want. Within the hour typically.’

Some feral Spanish from Juana – or was it Yaqui? - followed by a swipe of the claw. ‘Men talk to Lexi all the time. Even when she’s not wearing a bikini.’

‘What?’

‘I mean...at work, when she’s in the *Tenebrae* t-shirt. Or wearing a jacket. They come and talk to her because she looks friendly. Then she steers them into a cul-de-sac and, eventually, they go away.’

Juana was clearly so confident in her prediction that she pulled the *Spider Demon* t-shirt back over her face, coiled her legs in tight to her waist again, and rotated onto her side. Nick, on the other hand, was getting more excitable, pointing at the water and telling me how serene and comfortable Lexi looked with the new Japanese guy beside her.

I lasted another forty seconds, maybe a minute, before his words became a toddler’s whiny scream and then decided, fuck it, even if I’m a sexless monk, I’m not letting that guy get his paws on my *Nightmare Castle* playmate.

Awkwardly pulling off my t-shirt [and throwing it at Nick’s face], I breathed in fifty per cent, jogged down to the shore and took a straight line towards Lexi’s position. Something in my head was saying, guy’s in the way, push him, smack him in the face, and my fist was ready, but then I saw Lexi’s face and the pacifist part took over.

‘Entertaining the kids?’ I asked, moving skin close, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder

It was an odd line, and no one answered for a second, but then the Japanese guy conferred telepathically with his white friend and came back with a ludicrous, ‘who the fuck are you, chunk?’

I turned, the tone of his *you* re-activating my volcano cortex and...watched as the back of Lexi’s hand clipped him on the ear.

‘The fuck...’ spluttered out of his mouth, and then, ‘fucking crazy bitch,’ as his friend grabbed his arm, acting out a pretty unconvincing show of pulling him away.

One or two other faces looked over and shrugged.

Fucking bitch, servant fucking cunt, didn’t wanna fuck her anyway.

Some childish splash backs.

Then, a minute later, they were next to the wave bots, perverting on a group of paddle-boarding Indian girls.

‘Fucking deserved it,’ said Lexi, the look in her eyes the same as mine when Ryu had tried to explain Hegel one time. ‘Right?’

I leaned in and kissed her, wrapping my arms around her back.

‘Lake Arrowhead bravado,’ I said, finally pulling back half an inch, the tone on the last word fading a bit as I realized there was *still* nothing happening in my shorts.

‘Just...really felt like hitting him...’

‘I know the feeling.’

‘...even before you got here...’

‘Understood.’

‘...so I did.’

‘Good.’

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After kissing a few more times, and splashing each other [as was expected when people were in water yet couldn't be bothered to swim], we both got a bit bored – literally said to each other that we were bored - and waved at Nick and Juana to come in and join us.

Nick stared back like an android programmed exclusively to sit on sand and stare, while Juana didn't even see us with the t-shirt over her face. However, she did appear to have Andi Chopra on radar, and, when he started a staggered approach towards her position, she sprang up like a leopard from the sand and hurried into the water. Apparently afraid of being alone, Nick left all our stuff behind, including his residential card, and followed her in.

'Thought you were in a coma,' said Lexi, as Juana lowered her head onto the top of the surface and pseudo-bobbed towards us.

'Recharging,' she replied, rising back up and spitting water into Nick's face behind her.

'That was hygienic,' he said, wiping it off with more lake water.

'... ..'

'What?'

'He's coming,' said Juana, giving the slightest nudge of her face towards the shore.

I skimmed the faces even though there was no real need. Andi Chopra was a distinctive guy, from filmns and hair insurance ads, and the way he was striding through the water made everyone else take notice too. Like a local tyrant coming to inspect a peasant's fruit stall.

'Bit behind schedule, comrade,' said Nick, as Chopra reached Juana and, with the same confidence as his most iconic character Captain Eto, put his hand directly on her waist.

'... ..' Juana spat, pushing it away.

'I was hoping you would do that,' Chopra answered, looking down at her stomach and then roaming slowly up.

‘... ..’

‘My place is just over the ridge there.’ He pointed across to a large, Portuguese type villa on the shore, about a kilometre away. ‘We could be in bed with Chilean grapes in less than twenty minutes.’

‘... ..’

‘Is that Spanish, darling? I don’t recognize any of the-...’

‘Yaqui,’ said Nick, splashing water over his shoulders.

‘Sorry?’

‘An indigenous language that everyone knows.’

‘Do I know you? Are you a resident here?’

‘Serious, dude?’

‘You don’t recognize him?’ Lexi asked, giving some kind of coded look to Juana, who was slowly sinking down into the depths of the lake.

‘I know he’s not David Arquette,’ said Chopra laughing, reaching out for Juana’s arm and failing to pull her back up.

‘It’s Nick Stahl...from the *Terminator* filmns.’

‘*Dead Bitch on Pluto, Post Office, Bully,*’ Nick added, his voice slightly irritated.

‘That’s stellar. Another D-lister. From fifty years ago.’ Chopra fake smiled and stepped closer to Juana. ‘Now, about our little trip to my bedroom...’

‘Busy right now,’ she replied, sinking down to mouth level, shifting back towards Nick. When she got close enough, her body suddenly rose up again and backed right into his chest, her spoon hand pulling his arm around her stomach like a seatbelt.

‘Wait. No. She’s your bit?’

Juana spat out lake water. ‘I’m not a tennis racket.’

‘You’re together? Really?’

‘Only until you leave, Chopper,’ said Nick, eyes lighting up lilac.

‘Fuck. This guy? Over me?’

‘... ..’

‘What?’

‘... ..’

‘English, bitch.’

Nick put a hand on Juana’s wrist, stroking down onto her fingers. ‘She said get the fuck out of here before I rip open your skull and eats the spongy bits. *I* being her. Not me.’

‘The fuck...’

‘I’d just flay you. Or freeze you. Flay and freeze combo.’

Chopra slouched back his arm, and I could see in his eye that he was already mentally smashing his fist into Nick’s face, but some part of his brain managed to get the leash on, probably warning him about the headlines, the horror vlogs, telling him to save it for the servants back home, or even better, the NPCs in *VR Lake Arrowhead*.

Then Lexi splashed water in his face and told him full spartan to *fuck off to Kyrgyzstan*.

‘You black little-...’

The back of his hand shot out, clipping her on the chin, and whatever satisfaction he got out of that lasted about three milliseconds as I caught him square on the nose, and then a second punch slightly to the side of it as I pushed forward and tackled him into the waves.

He was fairly strong, but not enough to topple me, and definitely not enough to stop Lexi jumping in and punching him a few more times, then grabbing the tail of his hair and shoving his face under the water.

‘Fucking sick of all you fucking...pervs,’ she yelled roughly at the spot where the reflection of his face was...and then just into the water itself as he was gone and I was holding nothing and everyone else in the lake was splashing around as if the whole thing had never happened.

‘What...’ I mumbled, dazed, snatching at random parts of the water.

‘He’s over there,’ said Nick, still with his arm around Juana.

‘Didn’t we just...’ started Lexi, looking at her own hand, the water, the background NPCs.

‘You hit him, he hit you. Then I altered things a little to stop you drowning a world famous filmn star in front of two-hundred, financially comfortable witnesses.’

‘But...he was right here...’

‘You altered everyone’s mind?’

‘...now he’s there...’

‘Two hundred of them?’

‘...how?’

‘Relax, no one’s calling the police. It was a spat, you traded blows, it got resolved, he’ll go back home and take it out on a maid or something.’

‘So I did hit him?’

‘Or crawl into his private VR suite. Yes, you hit him, and Lexi got him too. It was very explosive. Now, why don’t we all swim a while, let things simmer down?’

‘I don’t understand...’ mumbled Lexi, poking a finger into the water.

‘Proposal approved.’ Nick lifted Juana’s arm off him and tickled her *Nadja ja ja* tattoo, letting out a fake *wah* when it didn’t rub off. ‘How about this? We race each other to the middle of the lake.’

‘Now?’

‘As you’re my girlfriend, I’ll give you a five minute head start. You too, Lexi.’

The idea didn’t seem to stimulate Lexi much, probably cos she was still scanning the shore for people calling the police or holding their phones up to record themselves reacting to the Chopra brawl, but Juana seemed to be okay with it.

‘Memory magic,’ she said, seizing Lexi’s hand and leading her further out into the lake. ‘Better not to dwell on the mechanics.’

‘You saw it too?’ she asked, offering token resistance.

‘Swim time. Start kicking.’

When they were a few metres away, Nick put an arm around my shoulder and told me he was a bit worried.

‘About Chopra?’

‘Lexi. This new-found aggression of hers.’

‘She only splashed him...if I’m remembering right...’

‘...and punched the Japanese guy. Dude, I see everything, eyes in the sky. She wasn’t like this before, at the video place, so what I’m wondering is...’

‘You caused it?’

‘...if I somehow-...yeah, exactly that. It’s a fickle, unpredictable process, the purple fixing...and there’s a chance that I did it so much...in a much too short space of time...that it knocked the balance out. But, then again, I suppose it could also be other factors, more naturalistic ones.’

‘Like never answering questions and putting hard porn posters up?’

‘Dude, that was an assist. A blatant one.’

‘Which made things a hundred times worse.’

‘Huh, you mean you didn’t do anything last night?’

I flinched, looking towards the shore.

‘This morning?’

Andi Chopra was back in the VIP area now, with a bottle of something in his hand. No glass. No maids.

‘Wah, that bad? Hmm. Maybe it’s stress. Or Lexi’s new fighter attitude.’

‘It’s not her. I’m fine.’

‘Or maybe you just fucked each other too soon, too many times. Evaporation of the lust factor...actual comprehension of the words she’s saying during everyday conversation and feeling kind of bored of it all.’

Something about his voice made me turn and...

‘Did you do something to me?’ I asked, rushing the words out.

‘Why, do you feel strange?’

‘No...’ I stammered, caught a little off guard by the speed of his response. ‘Not really.’

‘Then I didn’t.’

About thirty metres distant, Lexi yelled back at us, telling us to start swimming.
'Besides your brain is already messed up with all that science nonsense. Too dangerous to go in there now.'

'You didn't change anything, last night at the party?'

'Not my style.'

'Before that?'

'Dude, no time...they're getting too far ahead.'

Nick let go of my shoulder and dived down and forward into the lake. When he resurfaced he was already halfway to Lexi and Juana.

He can definitely swim then, I thought, pushing off after him.

And evade.

Like a fucking Napoleon.

+++

The rest of the afternoon was fairly uneventful.

We swam about a hundred metres out then turned back when Nick told us there were giant eels in the deeper parts of the lake.

None of us really believed him, but once the image was there...

On the beach, we stretched out on the sun loungers and tried to nap.

Nick tossed me his copy of *Moon Prison*, which he'd apparently taken back the night before, and told me to focus on the scene transitions. I was confused for a second, but then I remembered my own stab at writing, *Yellow Muon Blob*, and said, 'sure, scene transitions.'

Andi Chopra drank two bottles of wine and was carried out of the VIP section by what I assumed were lifeguards.

Juana sat up to watch, saying she was hungry.

'Too famous,' warned Nick, licking sand off his finger.

'Not him. Dinner. I feel like tacos.'

‘Ah, good idea.’

‘There’s a place next to the VR plaza,’ said Lexi, sitting up and slowly stretching the *Xxun Alchemist* t-shirt down over her bikini. ‘I noticed it yesterday.’

‘Gods in heat, not VR...’

‘I wasn’t suggesting that.’

‘You will.’

Lexi fixed the creased parts of her t-shirt round the shoulders and stared at the intransigent alien time genie thing.

‘You will,’ he repeated, licking more sand.

+++

Turned out Nick wasn’t as psychic as he thought.

We did end up at the VR plaza, but it wasn’t Lexi who pulled us there, it was a slightly drunk and whimsical Juana, who started with, ‘I tried one of the *Harem Survival* games once,’ and finished with, ‘how about the Category IV Lake Arrowhead thing?’

Nick didn’t look too pleased about this suggestion, but it was three against one and no one was letting him near their heads with those purple fingers of his, so in we went, the extortionate price neutered by his magical resident’s card.

Being located in a millionaire’s haven, the set-up was a little different from the more common franchise places I’d played in before, with a lot of luxurious extras:

1] An optional concessions drip; alcohol, nicotine, soup, weed, cocaine, though the higher level drugs had an auto-cut off to prevent in game ODs.

2] As Nick had previously mentioned, some real-world celebrity residents of Lake Arrowhead had signed consent forms to feature as NPCs, most of them appearing as younger, slightly tweaked versions of themselves.

3] A blue beacon was auto-embedded in the player’s arm while in the simulation, to let other players know they were human and untouchable.

Of course, the majority of these were only applicable to the Category III and IV versions of the games [if they had them], like *Nightmare Castle*, *Harem Survival 4*, and the one we were patching into, *Lake Arrowhead X* [it would've been *Nightmare Castle* for Lexi and me, if the server hadn't been closed for repair – the sign received a kick and *fuck you* for that one...not from me].

'I've set the weed drip for sativa effect, fifteen milligram, four hours,' said Lexi, leaning over to my seat and examining my pad menu.

'I'll do the same then.'

'Juana?'

'I'm going to Maika Monroe's house.'

'Huh?'

'Her name's on the character list...*madura y lista*...gonna try and fuck her, if she's in.'

'Okay, Chopra,' I muttered, finishing my own settings and lying back.

'Can't believe I'm debasing myself like this,' said Nick, sitting on the end seat with his legs crossed.

'You can wait outside if you like,' said Lexi, head back, eyelids down.

'Fucking replica of Lake Arrowhead...'

His voice faded to static hum as I patched in and, after the usual few seconds of staring at the near distance, pushed myself off the bench outside the VR plaza and followed Lexi out into the middle of the main road.

Juana joined us for a second, commented on how realistic it all looked, then got on one of the rental bikes nearby and rode off towards Maika Monroe's house.

The blue beacon on her arm kept her in sight all the way to the first bend, when it was replaced by another blue beacon coming the other way.

'Is she coming back?'

'Different player,' said Lexi, adding *fuuuck* abruptly as someone broke a window across the street.

Blindly obeying gut-reflex, I stepped in front of Lexi, then settled in at her side as she maneuvered around me. Two guys were cheering with their arms raised outside the *Happy Later Yoga Centre*, their boots crunching on the broken glass.

‘I guess they don’t like yoga,’ was the best line I could manage.

‘Where’s Nick?’ asked Lexi, checking the intro bench behind us.

‘Maybe he didn’t patch in.’

A horn beeped to the left, making the two guys stop their celebration. They raised another rock up in the air then saw the blue light on the driver’s arm, slurred something about loving *Bitch on Pluto* and went back to ape-dancing.

‘You getting in?’ Nick asked, pulling up at a skewed angle.

‘To go where?’

‘Away from those lunatics. If this thing’s accurate, there should be a quiet little beach spot about ten minutes east.’

‘Err...we might just stick around here.’

‘Or go to one of the celeb houses,’ added Lexi.

‘Kim Ok Bin is just up from my beach spot. Angela Bassett’s house too. You can break in and trash the place. Force her to watch *Supernova*. Stare into those dull featureless eyes.’

I looked at Lexi, trying to communicate without words that I didn’t want to spend the next four hours in an awkward triangle. Based on the subtle shaking of her head, she didn’t fancy it much either.

‘Relax, guys...I have no desire to watch you two grope each other...in this stale fucking construct. I’ll show you the spot then go for a long walk.’

‘In the other direction?’ asked Lexi.

‘Down to the bottom of the lake...if that’s what you want?’

‘Agreed.’

+++

True to his word, Nick dropped us off at a quiet part of the shore, with fairy lights hanging from arbitrary branches of the surrounding trees, and immediately headed down to the water's edge.

'Watch out for perverts,' he shouted back to us, scratching at the blue light on his arm.

'You too,' Lexi replied.

We sat down on the sand and watched him shift left towards what he claimed was Kim Ok Bin's gothic-style mansion, then switched to lying down and aimlessly stroking each other's arms.

Now and then, a blue light would blink in the distance, but they either didn't know about this spot or had no interest in it as none came any closer.

'I wonder if Juana's fucking Maika Monroe yet,' said Lexi with a dry giggle, the drip-weed clearly taking effect.

'Long as she's not sucking out Andi Chopra's brain.'

'Ha, I didn't think about that.'

'Me neither. Until just now. Wah, is that a boat?'

Lexi squinted at the dark mass that was the lake and, after almost a full minute, said, 'maybe an eel.'

We both laughed, moving our hands down each other's sides, kissing with our own blue lights blinking neon slides on our faces.

It's Lexi, I told myself over and over, praying for some kind of response as she ran her hand over my shorts, then, when nothing stirred, I changed tack to VR, it's VR, probably the type of weed they're feeding in, better wait till later. In the sex poster room. Where I failed last night.

Groaning ambiguously, I put fingers on her *Mizuno* shorts and stroked a bit, then took her hand and pulled it up towards my lips.

'Not feeling it?' she asked, letting me kiss each knuckle.

'Probably the VR.'

'Yeah, I feel a bit weird too.'

‘Or the weed.’

‘Almost routine, like we should do it, but...I don’t know. It’s hard to explain. Everything just feels a bit foggy, like I’m not in the right place. Which is kinda true...objectively...I guess.’

‘Probably Nick’s purple memory stuff...the after effects.’

‘Yeah, maybe.’

I took a long open-forum breath, sifting through the sand with my free hand. ‘I get the routine part though. The last day or two here, last night in bed...my mind is just...weird. Like, I don’t seem to feel much. Sexually. About anything.’

‘Not even the lady in the lake?’

‘Oddly...no.’

‘She *was* naked...big tits...’

‘Yeah, I noticed.’

‘...bloated face.’

‘Very alluring. Ha, yeah, pale and bloated. My dream woman.’

Lexi turned, snuggling into my side. ‘Maybe it’s the two brain thing?’

‘Me?’

‘Is it?’

‘I have no idea.’

‘Too weird to talk about?’

‘Nah, it’s-...I really don’t know, honestly. The scientists who did it, they didn’t explain much...or they did a bit, they came to see me after and...I vaguely remember some parts of what they said...what they said in Japan too...but it feels like ages ago now. Like, last year or something. Longer even.’

Lexi shifted again, propping herself up on one elbow. ‘What exactly did they do?’

‘In technical terms? Fuck knows. It was supposed to be a transplant of...them replacing my old identity with this one...Mark. I mean, the original Mark. But it didn’t quite work...the machine, I think...went wrong somehow, fucked things up.’

Her finger ran down the side of the space station on my chest, stopping at the reactor core. 'I don't really get it.'

'Yeah, me neither.'

'You wanted to erase your whole-...your life before this?'

'I suppose I must've.'

'And you still remember the Japanese part...'

'Sometimes. Randomly.'

'...and the language.'

'Yeah...and other stuff...'

I paused, pretending to be interested in something crawling along the sand. There was more on my mind, but it was Ryu-related and I didn't want to tell her that. However, she was looking at the sand too, the exact same spot as me, so I had to say something.

Or I would've if there hadn't been weird noises in the bushes nearby.

'You hear that?' she asked, looking over.

'Probably Nick messing around.'

'Can't see any blue lights.'

'NPC messing around.'

'You wanna check it out?'

It wasn't really an offer as she was already up on her feet and moving towards the tree line. I got up and followed after her, accidentally hitting myself with a drooping fairy light as I moved one of the branches aside.

The noises were both sporadic and varied; a series of desperate grunts, then a pause, then some kind of cracking sound.

I wasn't sure what species of animal would make that noise, so I figured it was an NPC being weird or malfunctioning, and Lexi agreed.

Then we saw two blue lights, hovering fairly still in the near distance, and reassessed.

'Could be someone fucking.'

‘Or fighting.’

‘Would that be permitted in this game? Two players?’

‘If they paid enough.’

‘What, rich on rich?’

‘Hmm...good point. Probably not.’

Pushing more branches out of the way, we traced the two blue lights to a child’s playground in an unknown celebrity’s garden. Surprisingly, they weren’t close to each other at all: one belonged to Nick, who was slumped against the ladder of a wooden slide, while the other belonged to the guy he was watching.

I circled round to Nick, keeping hold of Lexi’s hand, and tried to make sense of what I was seeing. Superficially, it was a tall guy in a loose-fitting mask, naked, fucking an equally naked NPC woman bent over a swing. But he was clearly old, or tired, as every few thrusts he would stop, breathe raggedly, then hit the NPC’s back with a stick. It was pretty bleak, but not the worst VR I’d ever stumbled across.

And then the NPC turned her head.

‘Wait, isn’t that...’ said Lexi, keeping her voice to a hush.

‘...Malina Weismann,’ Nick answered at normal volume, not looking up. ‘A younger version of her. Around seventeen, if I had to guess.’

‘And the elderly player guy?’

‘Malachi from *Children of the Corn*.’

I remembered the diner the day before, Nick telling me something about this, but for Lexi the answer was so bizarre that she let out a sharp *what?* Then quickly covered her mouth and ducked behind the ladder.

‘It’s okay, you can speak up. He doesn’t mind.’ Nick picked up a bit of gravel from under the slide and threw it at Malachi’s head. It must’ve struck him as he turned and told us to stop fucking interrupting. ‘Even Malina knows. The real one.’

‘She’s okay with this?’ I asked, raising my voice to overpower the whipping sound.

‘Can’t add a profile without the model’s permission.’

‘Even if someone’s...doing this to her?’

‘Consent covers everything. Rape, torture, murder, spitting.’

‘But...’

The rest of whatever my question was going to be petered out into simulated air as Malachi adjusted his younger self mask and started up with the thrusts again, adding, ‘you like it, don’t you, book girl?’ between grunts.

‘I think I wanna go home now,’ whispered Lexi, squeezing my hand and grabbing a rung of the slide ladder with the other.

‘You mean Nick’s place?’

‘No, Fresno. Tomorrow.’

‘I’ll drive you,’ answered Nick, throwing another speck of gravel at Malachi, hitting him on the ass crack.

‘Bus will be fine.’

‘We’ll all go. Make it a road trip...’

‘I prefer the-...’

‘...our platinum family adventure. What do you say?’



Drunk treading water
mottled blonde hair in the way as
I try to circle round
find the best method to hold her without leaking any more blood.
'One hand on the shoulder, other on the waist,' shouts Nick from the pier,
dressed in *Moon Prison* shirt and *Moon Prison* cap, 'before the eel comes out.'
I do another lap and try again but
this Lady in the Lake is resistant
almost life-like
her mouth yawning open, letting out the eel
its eyes shark-like and
there's static from the pier, Lexi hanging down, struggling with the tannoy
device, shouting at the wooden boards above her head that she's nearly got it, just a
few more twists of the wrench and
Nick yells again,
'grab her fucking shoulder, Keni, quicker
before the eel comes back,'

but I can't
it's too hard to get a grip, her body's too
out there
cavernous in a-

+++

At breakfast, we all sat perched on the edges of high stools, studying the nostalgic Arrowhead paintings, hoping the sun flowing in through the patio screen door wouldn't persuade Nick to lasso us into another day of lake activities.

Actually, I didn't really care if we stayed or fled – home had been a nebulous thing for a while now, family too - but I knew Lexi's mind was set.

She'd repeated it three times in bed the night before, and twice this morning before coming down.

'Need to go home, sleep in my own bed.'

What Juana thought...no idea. She just sat there in her *Spider Demon* t-shirt, rotating a pear on the table surface, possibly a come down from fucking the simulated version of Maika Monroe the previous night. Or being rejected by her. Rejected and...

'Pretty day,' said Nick, finally, finishing off the dregs of his juice.

I sucked in kitchen air, waiting for the next line...

'I'll go start the car.'

...and released.

+++

Thankfully, by car he didn't mean the usual Lego thing we'd been riding around in, but a semi-vintage KIA stinger he'd apparently borrowed from next door. *A generous neighbour* who owed him a favour [allegedly].

He didn't say which one, and none of us really cared as this set of wheels was a definite upgrade. Safer, too. Looked like it might actually be possible to crawl out if Nick suddenly went *full alien* and drove into the lake, as opposed to the Lego thing which would've pinned us in for sure.

'Five hour drive to Fresno,' said Lexi, as Nick pulled out onto the main road without checking right. 'Down to the 210, switch to the five-way and end on the 99.'

'Relax, comrade, I know which way to go,' he replied, patting Juana on the knee.

'Without Auto-Nav?'

That stumped him for a second, and me too. Then I noticed the small hole where the Auto-Nav should've been. 'Guess he must've taken it out,' Nick said finally.

'Your micro car didn't have it either.'

'Never mind. Alien knowledge plus phone should be sufficient. Juana, you ready?'

The Mexican poked her finger in the Auto-Nav hole and said, 'sì.'

'In Yaqui?'

'... ...'

'If we don't make any stops, we could get there for lunch,' I said, offering Lexi some vague optimism as she gave up on the front seat nonsense, straightened out the *Xxun the Neutrino Alchemist* t-shirt and dropped a tired head down on my shoulder.

'The two of us, okay.'

'Of course.'

Our new spacious set of wheels carried on round the lakeside road, past the trail towards the creepy Reagan shack, Andi Chopra's villa on the left, the western shore, all of it observed through a haze lens as I was still half asleep.

Just before the corner that led straight to the main part of the town, Nick pulled over and pointed at the blood red roof sticking up over a closed gate.

'You wanna knock on the door, invite her along?' he asked, turning to Juana.

'...'

'Who?' I asked, squinting at the sign on the wall.

‘Why have we stopped?’ tried Lexi, leaving my shoulder.

Nick ignored us both and stayed with the Yaqui. ‘Not as malleable as the poet, but looks-wise...’

‘Keep driving, *por favor*.’

‘Or you could just eat her.’

‘Pedal. Drive.’

‘Yeah, drive, please,’ seconded Lexi, staring at the road to the left, the way out of this adventurist void-scape.

‘Okay. Your call.’

The car backed up and rejoined the main road, with neither Nick nor Juana adding anything more. In the back, Lexi abandoned my shoulder and leaned instead against the window, pulling vacantly at her t-shirt collar, while I slouched back and tried to figure out whose mansion that was.

The gut said Maika Monroe, cos Juana had cycled there in the Lake Arrowhead VR, but there was no way to be sure.

And I only knew about five of the residents anyway.

Two of them female.

An image of Malina Weissman getting her ass thumped by a decrepit pensioner careened in and out of my brain, then reconfigured itself with two test dummy inserts, fucking in a more normal way.

Yeah, Maika Monroe’s house.

Had to be.

+++

According to Nick, it was about an hour to Pasadena, which gave us plenty of time to sit back in Tarkovskyan silence and watch the San Something Valley roll by.

Nick tried a few tangents – Big Bear Lake, forest fires, a centre for abandoned pets in Bakersfield that taught them how to count and read – but nothing stuck, so he resorted instead to humming melodies and tapping the wheel.

Lexi kept her post by the window, staring at the bungalow shacks drifting by.

On my side, it was the mountains.

Valley people.

Huge sections of broken road.

Car Insurance boards.

Sidewalk fires [for burning rubbish].

And the occasional recharge station.

When we started creeping up on the fringes of LA, Nick abandoned the humming and asked if there were any good places to visit in movie town.

‘Me?’ I asked, confused.

‘Dude, you were there for about two minutes. I’m asking Lexi.’

‘Don’t know,’ she answered in a slow drawl.

‘What about Redundant Beach?’

Lexi glanced at Nick through the windscreen mirror. ‘Ask Juana. She lived in LA for years.’

‘Yeah, but you lived there recently. More up to date info.’

‘Why are we talking about LA?’ asked Juana, winding down the passenger window an inch and letting in some breeze.

‘Prep and planning. We need to find some scumbags for you to eat.’

‘Not hungry.’

‘And as we’re right next to a capitalist stronghold...’ A car to the side suddenly cut in front, provoking Nick into a tirade of fuck neologisms and horn smacks. ‘Dude, there’s the first candidate. Probably a TV producer. Nah, but we can’t do anyone famous...even vaguely famous...which rules out Bel Air and Maliboot. How about West Hollywood? I heard that’s pretty deprived.’

'I'm not that kind of hungry,' Juana said again, winding down the window an inch more.

'You will be at some point.'

'*No boy satanáas.*'

'Plenty of scumbags for her to choose from in Fresno,' said Lexi, rolling up the sleeve of her *Xxun Alchemist* t-shirt – another habit, along with the collar pinching, that I'd noticed in the last day or two.

'What, the Neo-Nazis?'

'For starters, yeah.'

'That's your normal diet?' he asked, turning to Juana.

'Fresno,' she replied, sticking her arm down the outside of the door.

'Strange answer.'

'Familiar terrain. Comfortable.'

Nick muttered *more than LA?* then finger-tapped the wheel. 'Okay, Fresno it is then.'

+++

Glendale was after Pasadena, then a switch to the Five-Way, but for some reason Nick chose to continue right on the 210, telling a white stain on the windscreen that he hated Glendale for reasons that were too opaque to go into.

I thought of asking despite this, but we were already quite far along the highway, so I shifted over to Lexi and asked her about her time in LA instead.

'Later,' she answered, fairly abruptly.

'Okay.'

'When we're alone.'

She took my hand as compensation and stroked the palm, her eyes going back to the scenery outside that was split almost binarily into strip desert on the right, stark mountain vistas on the left.

+++

After an hour of continually driving north east, Lexi leaned forward and told Nick he was going the wrong way.

‘It’s an alternative route...’

‘No, we’re heading in the wrong direction. See, the sign says 395 now. That goes up to the east side of Yosemite.’

‘She’s right,’ confirmed Juana, seemingly waking up from a trance as she swayed her head left and then right before finally using her hands to manually steady herself.

‘I’m taking us in via Lake Isabella. That’s this way.’

‘Can I borrow your phone?’ asked Lexi.

‘Trust me, I’ve done this trip before.’

‘Phone?’

Nick reached forward and brushed invisible dust off the dashboard, which seemed like a *no*, so Juana snuck her hand into his jacket pocket and took it for him. A couple of swipes and she had the map up. ‘Lake Isabella?’

‘Yes.’

‘We’ve gone past it already.’

‘What? Are you sure?’

‘We need to go back and turn left onto the...no, turn right if we’re going south...turn right onto the 178 and...Lake Isabella is maybe twenty minutes away.’

Nick covered Juana’s hand and shifted the phone screen towards himself, laughing when she repeated *178*, then calling the stain on the windscreen an idiot.

‘Must be immersion haze from last night,’ he explained, spinning the wheel and doing a no-look turn into the opposite lane.

Luckily, there were no other cars around.

Or speed cams.

Just a faded yellow sign promoting Yosemite.

And a deserted payment booth underneath it.

+++

My projected *lunch in Fresno, just the two of us, Lexi* now became a club sandwich at an abandoned camping ground on the east shore of Lake Isabella. Which, for some reason, still had its price banner up: \$31 per night base charge, extra \$11 for each person, \$13 for pets, \$10 for all active or non-active vehicles, \$4 per hour of campfire duration, \$25 security coverage, \$9 for noise allowance, and about forty other extortionate add-ons.

‘Fucking adventurers,’ Lexi said, quarter-chewing her sandwich, tone surprisingly caustic. ‘Always sneaking additional shit in.’

‘At least it’s quiet,’ replied Nick, scanning the lake.

‘Yeah, like a graveyard.’

‘Hmm...or a small, icy moon. Governed by a suffocating hologram.’

‘Err...’

‘With a graveyard nearby.’

‘...I suppose.’ Lexi took another bite of the sandwich, dropping some lettuce bits on *Xxun the Neutrino Alchemist*. ‘Kuso...’

‘Is that a coffee shop over there?’ Nick continued, oblivious.

‘Coffee?’ I asked back, frowning as the lettuce bits were switched to my hoodie sleeve.

‘Yes, it is. An actual coffee shop.’

‘Huh? I can’t see anything. Where?’

‘Of all the places...’

‘Is it behind us?’

The door opened, Nick slid out. ‘Back in five.’

‘Invisible?’

+++

After finishing the meal [and leaving the crusts], Lexi and I got out of the car to stretch our legs a bit, walking to the edge of the water and attempting to skim non-flat pebbles across the surprisingly clear surface.

Juana stayed in the passenger seat, napping.

'You think he's messing with us?' asked Lexi, picking up yet another ill-shaped stone and lobbing it grenade-like into the water.

'The alternative route thing?'

'Yeah.'

'I don't know. Maybe.'

She frowned, picking up another stone...then dropping it back down again when she saw dried bird shit.

'It was weird that he avoided Glendale.'

'And took us up the 395.'

I threw a stone of my own, getting three skims. 'You don't think that was an honest mistake?'

'No one accidentally goes the route he did, it's impossible.'

'Even for an alien?'

She gave up on throwing and wedged the tip of her shoe under a fairly large rock.

'We'll both keep an eye on him this time...'

'Okay...'

'...make sure there are no more weird turns.'

'...but a soft eye. And no insults. He can be very capricious.'

Leaning back, she flicked up the rock and gave out a single *ba* when it landed a foot short of the water.

+++

After a few more throws, we headed back to the car and...hissed out *fuuuuuck* and *kuuuuuuu* when it wasn't there anymore.

'Tracks,' said Lexi, pointing at the clear tire marks up ahead, and we followed them for two, three hundred metres, cursing that devious alien fuck every step of the way. Finally, the car materialised between a large rock and two rough-looking shacks, with Nick perched on the bonnet, happily chatting to another guy. As we got closer, I realized it wasn't any ordinary guy, it was an absolute mountain; built, bearded, bitter-eyed, with a flak jacket that said *Serbian Death Squad* - that literal text, in English - on the back.

'Jano here has invited us in for a coffee,' said Nick, sliding down off the bonnet, eyes pure neutrino fuzz.

'Sorry, no time,' answered Lexi quickly, nudging me in the side.

'We are pretty rushed.'

'Okay, a quick edit then. Coffee by the car. That okay with you, big guy?'

Jano looked past Nick towards Juana in the front seat, scratching dry flakes of skin off his neck. When there were no more left, he grunted.

'Great. You go brew up four cups, I'll fill in these guys about your hobby.'

'Takeaway cups?' I asked, getting another nudge.

'Wah...don't be rude, Keni. Jano here is a very interesting guy. Very ethical, too.'

The big Serb shoved a hand in his trouser pocket, eyes still glued to Juana. 'She speak English?'

'Coffee first, big man, chat with the lovely Juana later.'

'Yeah, actually, can we just skip the coffee and go?' asked Lexi, tone not even close to making it a question.

'You haven't heard what Jano does here yet.'

'Don't really care. No offence.'

It was a redundant supplement as Jano was too busy walking round the side of the car, one hand still wedged inside his trouser pocket, the other running a fingernail along the paintwork.

‘He makes cyborg dogs,’ continued Nick, gesturing to the shack to the left of the slightly bigger shack that had JANO COFFEE painted on it. ‘Trained to attack criminals. Without mercy. That’s his workshopp over there.’

‘Cyborg dogs?’

Jano knocked on the window of the passenger side and waited for Juana to wake up and wind it down. It took about a minute, but finally she managed it, sticking her head halfway out and asking, ‘what’s going on?’ directly to Nick.

‘I got a private server VR inside, state of the art,’ said Jano, putting a giant hand in front of her face. ‘You can come next to me, patch in.’

Juana blinked half-comatose, then squinted. ‘Who are you?’

‘Or we sit on the couch, play with cyborg dogs. It is also okay.’

‘Nick?’

Grinning like a JAL-bot pimp with a monopoly on the Miho model, Nick walked over and clamped a hand on Jano’s shoulder. ‘It’s okay, *querida*, I’ll show you his workshopp after. You’ll feel completely guilt free. I promise.’

‘... ..’

‘What you say?’ asked Jano, peeling off Nick’s hand.

‘Think of it as storage food.’

‘... ..’

‘Come on, at least use Spanish.’

Juana sat up straight, and started to wind up the window.

‘Hey, what is happening?’ demanded Jano, giving Nick a hard shove in the shoulder, then quickly raising his right fist for a follow up.

‘Serbians...’ muttered Nick, fingering a spiral on his jacket collar.

Jano clearly didn’t like this as he blurted out a stream of angry-sounding nonsense that wasn’t English and only came to an end cos he started coughing.

Coughing a lot, violently. Then a short interlude before he coughed again, spat out a huge glob of blood and dropped like a sack of cyborg parts on to the dirt...managing to crawl a few feet to a small metal sign that spelled out *J A O P A C E* in broken radium tubes.

‘You guys just never learn, do you?’

Nick bent down and grabbed a chunk of Jano’s morally questionable jacket then, with no warm-up breaths or *please god please*, lifted him up to waist height. ‘Get in the car, I’ll be back out in a second.’

Lexi was already by the car door, putting my *Damijana Chu* hoodie on, while I stood and watched Nick carry a two hundred odd pound man like a grocery bag over to the workshopp shack.

It shouldn’t have been a huge surprise, I’d hit him before and he just looked at me as if I were a four year old child with sponge hands...but part of my brain clearly thought it deserved some astonishment.

An alien with super strength.

And memory altering purple shit in his fingers.

Driving us around in a KIA stinger.

With no Auto-nav.

‘Stop gaping,’ shouted Lexi from inside the car, and the tone had just enough irritation in it to break through. Grunting back, I opened the door on my side and shifted over to the middle, telling them both that we should probably be nice to him for a while, at least until we got to Fresno.

‘Or just nap like Juana until we’re back,’ countered Lexi.

‘Also a good idea.’

A few minutes later, the driver’s door opened and Nick collapsed onto his seat with an exaggerated outpouring of breath. ‘You had your chance, Juana. Sorry.’

‘Fresno,’ she replied, opening one eye.

‘What did you do with Jano?’ I asked, not really sure I wanted to know the answer.

'Left him in the bosom of his work.'

I flicked the top of my thumb with my fingernails. 'You mean...'

'He's in the workshopp.'

'Like...'

Nick sat up, looked over the driver's seat, shook his head at Lexi's hoodie.

'...near the door or...'

'The dogs are eating him, Keni. And making weird synth noises while doing it.

That enough detail for you?'

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To keep my brain from sliding off into some horror dimension with Nick as the emcee, I quickly decided that he was joking and that the cyborg dogs were still locked up tight in their cages.

It seemed like Lexi had done a similar thing, compartmentalizing the weird stuff and then grabbing Nick's phone again to make sure he didn't sway from the designated path.

He still tried it though, pointing at the mountains to the right of the 178 and saying how that was the secret, more interesting way to enter Fresno.

'30km. Bakersfield. Switch to the 99.'

'Dude, so robotic...'

'Goes straight to Fresno.'

'Like a cyborg dog.'

Lexi leaned forward and put her hand on the top of Nick's seat. For a moment, I thought she was going to hit him or scrape nails down his neck, but instead she smiled and said, 'please, Nick.'

It seemed to do the trick.

Or confused him enough to nod and not turn right at the next junction.

'Fresno express it is, comrade.'

‘Thank you.’

‘Guess we’ll have to check out Cedar Grove some other time.’

+++

By the time we arrived at the outskirts of Fresno, the sky was ethereal pink.

Nick stopped the car next to a billboard sign still promoting Grape Fest from the week before – or two weeks before - and told us to take a minute to appreciate the view.

It wasn’t said in an insistent tone so we stayed where we were, me staring at the grape fields through the windscreen, Lexi looking at the highway to the left and Juana napping like a baby.

‘How about some fresh air?’ asked Nick, pushing open his door. ‘A walk in the grape rows?’

‘I’m okay,’ I said, then almost tumbled out onto the grass when my door swung open.

Nick circled the car, doing the same to Lexi and Juana, showing just enough care to catch the latter with one arm as she dropped.

‘I’m not sleeping out here,’ said Lexi, shuffling forward so she could steady herself on the bonnet.

‘All I thought was,’ answered Nick, guiding Juana to the steps behind the billboard sign and seating her on the first row, ‘we could sit for a while, watch the AH-bots work over there in the field.’

‘It is weirdly relaxing,’ I said, joining Lexi on the bonnet.

‘Until the locals turn up and start fucking on the grass.’

‘Huh?’

‘This is a black picnic spot. Code for teenage sex site.’

‘Ah...that explains all these tied-up condoms,’ said Nick, peering through the slats of the steps.

‘Well, there’s no one here now,’ I said, looking around, smiling when I saw Nick holding Juana up by the shoulders, as if he were trying to promote the *Moon Factory* Ø pic on her hoodie. ‘Just us and the AH-bots.’

‘And memories.’

‘Huh, you’ve been here before?’

‘Not my memories. Other people’s.’ Nick looked at Lexi, who was suddenly pretending to monitor the shifting purple fade in the sky. ‘Your young poetess, Sadia, for example. She came to this spot before.’

‘How you know that?’ slurred Juana, jerking upwards, and instantly switching to grinding the side of her head.

‘Alien magic.’

‘You got her trace?’

‘Aspects of it.’

I pushed off the bonnet and walked over, sitting down next to Juana, who appeared to be acting out some kind of paganistic head dance. Possibly a migraine. But that didn’t matter...what about Sadia? The rational side of me was saying, forget it, she’s in Portland, you’ve never even met her, but the other side, the sensualist...

‘This bench we’re on,’ Nick continued, pressing the tip of his index finger onto the metal board, ‘she sat in this exact place. Watching a boy messing around with one of those AH-bots.’

‘And now?’

‘Her present location? That takes determination. Process.’

‘Actually...I’m pretty sure she’s in Portland,’ I said, nudging Juana and disrupting her head massage. ‘Sadia sent you an email, remember?’

‘A brief one.’

‘It is possible she’s still there.’ Nick put the metal board finger against the palm of his other hand and activated purple mist. ‘It’ll take a day or two to follow the source. Though I suspect she’s not alone.’

‘Boyfriend,’ I muttered, glancing over at Lexi, who didn’t seem to be listening to any of this.

‘Girlfriend?’ asked Juana, hitting her temples.

‘The last time I was here...in my other guise...I paid a visit to her house. There was a tree outside her bedroom window.’

‘I know that tree, I climbed it.’ My voice was rushed, excited, and loud enough this time to bring my girlfriend away from the pink sky. ‘After she disappeared.’

‘You were spying on her?’ asked Lexi, pushing off the bonnet, arms crossed.

‘No, she wasn’t there, I was just...checking out the area. There was a weird guy nearby, with sunglasses...’

I trailed off, as Lexi half-smiled and sat down on the bench next to me.

‘Pervert,’ she said softly.

‘Hey...’

‘He wasn’t the only one,’ interrupted Nick, replacing Juana’s hand with his own, digging fingertips into her skull. ‘One of the branches had a trace on it...another guy had sat there, before Sadia left. The same guy who is now in Portland.’

‘Wah, he followed her?’

‘That part is unclear. But his mind...his base programming...’

Juana shrugged off Nick and used my knee as leverage to lift herself up. Then, with one hand grinding into the side of her head, staggered back to the passenger’s side of the door.

‘We have to...’ she started to say, before slamming face first into the car window and sliding down without defence onto an emaciated patch of brown grass.

Nick was the first over, propping her up against the passenger door and planting two fingers firm against her forehead.

‘Is she okay?’ asked Lexi, hovering by his shoulder.

‘I warned her to eat something...’

‘She fainted?’ I asked, coming round the other side.

‘Fucking stubborn Yaqui lunatic...I warned her...gave her the Serbian guy on a fucking plate. Kuso. Fuck.’

‘Nick...is she okay?’

‘We need to get her a meal. Quickly.’

‘Food?’

‘Use your fucking brain, Keni.’

I paused, trying not to let in the basement scene. ‘But...it’s only been, what? Two days?’

‘Not even that,’ edited Lexi, putting a cautious hand on Juana’s hoodie sleeve.

‘And she’s already hungry again?’

There was no response, just a distant humming noise from a re-charging AH-Bot in a nearby grape row.

‘Nick?’

‘Addiction cramps...’

‘Huh?’

‘Expected at some point but...kept tight under that Yaqui bonnet. No, Kip was just a snack. One that was both half-assed and interrupted...nowhere near enough.’ He looked way back, past the billboard promoting expired grape festivals, towards the distant blocks of Fresno sealed under the darkening yet still quite pinkish sky.

‘She needs something bigger. Something substantial...’

‘In Fresno?’

‘...or she’s done.’



Puppet Master 2.

Critters.

The Running Man.

Re-Animator.

Something in Spanish with a green-lit cult priestess and two red X's on her robes.

Hang on...

Wasn't that...

I left the coffee machine to wring out the last drops by itself and maneuvered round the side of the counter. *Santa Sangre*. *Sangre* equaled blood...*Santa*...no idea, but probably not the Christmas guy...and the name at the top of the poster...ah, Jodorowsky, chief lunatic of bizarro cinema. The director who made films I liked conceptually but could never press *play* on when they were framed right there in front of me, on GENTE+, surrounded by shit like *Saving Hannukah* and *Full Moon Cop* and *Not My Cousin IV* and a dozen other *Something IV* movies.

The coffee machine whirred down, calling me back to the cup.

Two down, one to go.

Though whether Juana was cognizant enough to drink hers was a different matter. She'd managed a couple sips of water earlier, then went straight into nap mode again. But not napping exactly, more like a trance...eyes opening now and then, arms shooting up, swatting invisible flies...random Spanish and Yaqui outbursts that Nick the sudden linguist said translated into *seventeen years and now this*.

Seventeen years of her life?

Of no starvation trances?

The video caffè?

I pulled out the cup with foam spilling over and replaced it with an empty one. Then pressed the button for green tea.

Seemed like a safer bet.

Healthier too.

The machine slipped back into routine, the blue lights on the side making me think briefly that there was a tiny human inside.

Same with the Recharge station lights on the drive into Fresno.

And the pseudo race circuit around Lake Arrowhead.

'Must be made by the same company,' I'd said to Lexi in the car and got that frozen eldritch face in return. Then her weirdness about the buildings being several inches out of phase. Structures pasted on top of other structures. Fresno not acting like the proper Fresno. Shivering as if we were camped on the summit of K2, squeezing her nails into the back of my hand.

Probably Juana related, the idea of getting her a meal.

The grimness of it.

I glanced over at the VR plaza opposite, stirring one of the coffees with the corner of a milk powder capsule.

Nick had been there at least half an hour now, plenty of time to patch in and single out a suitably wretched guy. Hopefully a Nazi or white supremacist. Then bring him back over here, fully mesmerized with the purple mist, and sit him down in the projector room next to Juana.

Or would they go down to the basement to do it?

That was the routine before, what she tried to do with me: sit the guy down, get the spiral clock spinning, fix claws on his skull and start digging, with Lexi watching golem-like nearby. Only this time it would be three of us, Nick, Lexi and me, her previous victim...attempted victim...standing there as golem substitutes, uploading a live fucking cannibalism show visceral-abstract into our heads and...Nick didn't matter, he was an alien, but Lexi and me, having that Cronenberg shit in our heads, then going to bed and running our hands over flesh that could be eaten on a whim by Juana, if she happened to be having a bad day and...would we ever touch each other again? Maybe the occasional squeezing of hands, stroking of arm skin, but nothing sexual. It would be done, eviscerated...replaced by this...the most realistic ever *Troma* flick.

Vague shape outside the window, staring in.

My eyes refocused and the blur morphed into a folded-up elderly man, faux-military jacket, military badges, face fixed on something to my left. I turned and saw the coffee machine. The *Mansion of Madness* poster behind it.

Yeah, okay...poster was the more likely choice, though the coffee machine did have the blue lights.

Could be immersion haze?

Appetency?

I turned back and realized it was neither the poster nor the coffee machine as he was now staring at the video shelves.

Then he was hobbling off.

Then he was gone.

Behind me, the coffee machine finished its cycle.

Still no sign of Nick coming out of the VR plaza. Maybe Lexi was right and he couldn't find anyone awful enough? And even if he did, what about tomorrow? Or next week? Set up camp outside the Neo-Nazi wing of the local prison? Head to LA?

We couldn't keep Juana going this way forever. At some point, she'd have to face up to things and...kill herself? Starve to death? Go cold turkey?

The physiology was still nebulous, unknown.

No, unexplained.

Was it life and death or not? Drug analogy or water?

And why were we her guardians anyway? I barely knew her, Nick didn't know her at all, wasn't even human, and Lexi...she'd been zombified for months, forced to assist...and now we were all here, trying to pull her out of...something that was apparently natural to her kind.

Was that rational?

Had Lake Arrowhead attached us all in some weird, deterministic way?

Would that be soft or hard determinism?

Was *hard* the god version?

Leech Woman on the *Puppet Master 2* poster told me to stop with all the kindergarten philosophy and focus on getting the fuck out of there. Leave them all, run to Portland, knock on the door of Sadia and say, hey, that burning house poem you did, fucking incredible, can I come in and stay with you?

It was a rogue thought, I knew that, but looking around the video caffè with all the lights off...picturing with a pineal eye the bathtub, the Reagan shack, the sex posters...

Just take her the fucking coffee.

Watch the film.

Wait for Nick to come back.

I gave myself a few gentle slaps on the cheek and picked up the two cups of coffee, and hooked the tea onto my little finger. It shouldn't have balanced but somehow did, sloping only a tiny bit when I pushed open the STAFF ONLY door, and again as I put it down on the MACA box we'd dragged in from the corridor earlier to act as a sickbed table.

In the background, a guy shrieked into the camera as a *thing* in attic shadow floated over and devoured him.

‘No Nick?’ asked Lexi, sitting closer than I would’ve to Juana, hand covering the Mexican demon’s forehead.

‘Not yet.’

‘Probably still trying to figure out the menu pad.’

‘I had the same thought.’

‘Or arguing with the staff about payment.’

‘Also a possibility.’

Lexi took a sip of her coffee and flinched at the heat. Or the taste. Hopefully the latter, as then it wouldn’t be my fault.

‘Felt a bit weird out there, with the lights off,’ I continued, picking up one of my previous trains of thought. ‘Those blue lights on the coffee machine. Half expected the window to break.’

‘Huh?’

‘The Yoga Centre last night, those two dancing guys...’

She took more coffee, switched over to the screen. Pinhead was introducing himself and the cenobites to an 80’s girl, calling himself an explorer from another dimension.

‘I was trying to forget about that,’ Lexi replied, finally, putting her cup down on top of the box.

‘Lake Arrowhead...’

‘Yeah.’

An arm swept out, spasm effect, almost knocking over Lexi’s coffee. She reeled the cup back in towards the sci-fi queen on her hoodie [actually, my hoodie, still not given back] and whispered to Juana that it was okay, Nick would be back soon, hopefully with a Neo-Nazi or a rapist...or something even worse.

‘Don’t want it...’ Juana howled, one eye open full *Tenebrae*, fixed on the projection screen.

‘You have to.’

‘... ..’

‘What?’

‘She’s saying the *seventeen years* thing again,’ came Nick’s voice from the doorway.

I turned, surprised that I hadn’t spilt any coffee, and saw him standing rigid, grinning inanely at the *Hellraiser* scene playing on the screen, his right arm around the shoulders of a kid who couldn’t have been anything over nineteen.

‘Hello...’ I said, quite weakly.

‘Don’t bother, he can’t hear you,’ replied Nick, guiding the young man in and sitting him down on the couch beside Lexi. ‘Can’t feel a thing either, which is obviously for the best.’

‘Who is he?’ asked Lexi, keeping a tight grip on Juana’s arm as it spasmed again, along with another moan that she didn’t want it.

‘Nasty piece of shit, as ordered. Found him groping some blue woman’s tits in that Nightmare Dungeon game of yours.’

‘Nightmare Castle.’

‘Lavinia the Goddess of Death...’

Nick muttered *Lavinia* back to himself, then made a clicking noise with his tongue. ‘That’s the one. Said he was gonna burn her clit off with a poker. If he could find one. And cum on her stupid, dumb hat. Of course, he didn’t know I was lurking by the steps, evaluating.’

‘That’s it?’ asked Lexi, putting her cup down on the floor.

‘That’s what?’

‘You caught him feeling an NPC’s tits and saying a few sleazy lines and that’s your basis for this...bringing him back here?’

Nick picked up Juana’s tea, sniffing it. ‘My alien morality may be a bit off, but...’

‘To get his brain eaten?’

‘...none of that stuff is acceptable to humans, right? Keni?’

Pre-sensing it was gonna switch to me, I looked left at the screen for guidance, and got nothing but the attic man with a feral hand inside his lover, draining the life force right out of her.

‘Don’t know...’ I said, turning downwards to the ripples in my coffee.

‘He’s wearing a *Naruto* t-shirt for fuck’s sake,’ continued Lexi, pushing the young man’s hand off as it landed on her thigh. ‘We can’t do this. Just use the weird purple trick, your hands...’

‘I told you already, that is not possible.’

‘Then go south a few blocks, get a drunk or something, a white power gang member, someone scary-looking.’

Nick placed the tea back on the MACA box, muttered something inaudible to himself then bent down and rested his hand on Juana’s arm. ‘You told me to go to the VR plaza and find someone reprehensible. I did that. And now it’s feeding time. Unless you’d like to offer your brain instead?’

‘VR plaza was a last resort, that’s what I said. Not the first port of call. And not some kid who...just said some stuff.’

‘Must’ve whispered that last resort part.’ He put a hand on the patient’s hair, tugging it slightly. ‘Juana, you sentient?’

‘Don’t want,’ slurred Juana, lifting up her head, seeing the *Naruto* guy tilting unconsciously towards Lexi. ‘*Sácalo de aquí por favor.* Get him away.’

‘It’s okay,’ Nick said, switching back to her arm, patting it. ‘He’d burn your clit off if there were a poker nearby.’

‘Not hungry...’

‘And grope your tits.’

‘...*sacarlo lejos.*’

‘The auto-repair shopp in West Side.’ Lexi pushed the *Naruto* kid to the other arm of the couch, putting her hand up to stop the head rolling back again. ‘It’s a Neo-Nazi hangout, not that far from here...’

‘Would it be open now?’

‘No, but...one of them might be there. Working late or...standing on the street outside.’

‘Might be...’

‘More than one, maybe a whole group of them. It’s worth a try. Right?’

Nick lifted up the *Naruto* guy by his armpits and led him round to Juana’s side of the couch. ‘Sorry, Lexi. Time and pragmatism and...all that.’

On the screen, the attic man wailed in existential terror as the chains were strapped on and his body got ripped to pieces.

I watched, pretending to be rapt but really just hoping that Juana would suddenly sit up properly and say, *it’s fine now, the hunger pangs have gone, how about we watch a lighter film?*

Obviously, that didn’t happen.

Instead, Nick pushed the *Naruto* guy onto his knees and tried to fix the swaying head into a stable position on the arm of the couch. Satisfied, he lifted one of Juana’s hands and clamped it on the poor kid’s skull. She let out a strangled *don’t* again, but the proximity to *live brain* must’ve caused some instinctive reflex as her fingers sharpened into claws and those claws began the slow process of excavating the skull.

‘That’s it...easy...’ said Nick, as if he were doing nothing more than helping her drink cough syrup.

Lexi watched long enough to see the first trickle of blood then stood up, accidentally kicked over her coffee cup, called the stain a vapid fuck and hurried out.

It was the same thing I should’ve done, I knew that...watching a guy get slowly murdered on a worn-in couch...murdered the way I almost had been, at the claws of the same junkie demon...yet nothing moved...leg, arm, brain, neuron...nothing.

I just stood there, a background guard, and watched the climax of *Hellraiser*.

The 80’s girl taking back the puzzle box.

Reversing the motions.

Deranged as the cenobites-

‘Don’t want...please...’

Juana's voice broke the spell, pulling me back from the housse collapsing on screen.

Nick was attempting to push her head down towards the blood leak on the guy's skull, but she was resisting, pushing her face into the lining of the couch.

'Keni, get over here,' shouted Nick, giving up on Juana and instead trying to steer the head wound up to her mouth.

Then the memory hit.

Scattered, real.

The basement decor, Lexi golem, spiral clock, tied to a chair, blood dribbling down onto my eye...

I put the coffee on a non-existent table and shuddered as it smashed against the floor, then bumped off the couch arm on my dazed way out to the corridor.

'He's a white piece of shit,' yelled Nick after me, 'a future serial killer,' but the words merged with the *Hellraiser* end credits theme and then the STAFF ONLY door appeared and the next conscious thing I knew, felt, saw, witnessed was my feet running across the road towards Lexi, a disembodied voice asking her to wait up cos it was too much, I was coming too

+++

Wind whistles from a simulated crack in the wall.

High-pitched yet distant shout of 'Prospero!'

Faintest possible VR buzz from the stone floor.

Those were the sole recurring sounds as I lay on the rack, Lexi stretched out beside me, both of us staring up at the impressive ruin lines on the dungeon ceiling.

Home had been Lexi's first choice.

Her bedroom.

Under the covers.

But *Nightmare Castle* had been just a few metres across the road and there weren't many other people patched in at this time of night, on a weekday, so...

'You want to read the Munich Manual?' I asked, after another shout of *Prospero* from upstairs.

'No.'

'Call Lavinia?'

'No.'

'You sure?'

'Not in the mood.'

'Okay.'

We could tell her the guy who groped her is getting his brain eaten.

He was just in here half an hour ago.

I wonder if his whole brain's gone.

Where exactly does she dump the bodies?

Those were the next thoughts up and every single one made me conceptually nauseous, yet...trauma-wise...nothing. Maybe it was delayed shock. Or the Kip incident from the other night. Or my two brain hybrid fuck up debacle.

Or maybe I was a sociopathic piece of shit?

I looked down at Lexi's hand, then her arm, then the pattern on her t-shirt. It should've been game-specific costuming, but we'd clearly been so frazzled that we forgot to activate it. Which meant she was still wearing the same t-shirt as outside [under my *Damijana Chu* hoodie]. The one Nick had given her in Lake Arrowhead. *Xxun the Neutrino Alchemist*, four year-old alien with a plasma-spear and melon tits.

'I should go back,' she said, looking sideways.

'Home?'

'But I can't.'

'Too far?'

'I'm scared.'

'Huh? Why?'

She held up her hand and sketched out an air circle with her fingers, framing something on the ceiling. 'Irrational reasons.'

'Ah.'

'Beyond irrational.'

I put an arm across her stomach, vetoing the schismatic urge from my Id to slip it downwards, and stroked Xxun's plasma spear instead. 'Maybe we should go somewhere, just the two of us?'

Her arm swayed a bit, then came down onto my hand.

Rested there.

'Where?' she asked, finally, shifting her hand onto the cold stone of the slab.

'Don't know.'

'Not LA.'

'No, no...no way. Somewhere new. For both of us.'

The door at the top of the dungeon opened, followed by the inevitable sound of other player footsteps. We both sat up, running our hands along the rack, squinting at the ancient Sumerian text on the edges, then stopped immediately when the footsteps phased into the form of Nick, dressed in the same *Bored Real Hard* jacket as outside, telling us things were okay now, the procedure was done.

'Done...' muttered Lexi.

'How did you know we were here?' I asked, checking the steps behind him for a rejuvenated Juana.

'Alien mysticism...magic...one of the two.'

'Where's Juana?'

'It's okay, you can both lie back down.' He circled round the rack, halted at the Iron Maiden, pressed his fingers on the tips of the interior spikes. 'People really used to go inside this?'

'Is she okay?' prodded Lexi, moving herself in little pushes to the far end of the rack.

‘Well, that’s the question. She seems okay, but...it’s hard to know what effect my brain will have on her.’

It took a few seconds, but I eventually forced out a feeble, ‘what?’

‘I knew that would catch you. Yes, my brain. Nick Stahl the alien. Absolute fucking martyr of the hour.’

‘She ate it?’

‘Of course, it’s mostly your fault. Both of you. Lexi for pulling a hissy fit and you, Keni, for not helping me with that idiot kid. If you’d done that, and you’d both stayed, she probably would’ve felt okay about eating him. But as soon as you were gone, and it was just me...’

‘She didn’t eat him?’ asked Lexi, moving forward alongside the rack.

‘Nope. Not a crumb. Never seen someone bite so hard into a couch. Dude, it was fucking crazy. Had to fix the kid purple-style and dump him in the back alley. No Neo-Nazi’s walking by so...despite my misgivings-...’

‘I thought your brain was too...’

‘Alien. Yes. It might still be. But she appears to be okay at the moment.’

‘I don’t get it,’ said Lexi, looking at Nick’s forehead.

‘Why am I still talking without a brain? Well, that’s the funny thing. It turns out, actually, that she doesn’t need to eat the brain. Just suck in some of the vapour or nibble on specks.’

‘Specks...’

‘Tiny bits.’

‘But...if that’s right...why was she eating whole brains before? Why did she say she was gonna eat mine?’

‘I don’t know, Keni. Why does Malachi patch in to Arrowhead X every night and fuck Malina Weissman like a rag doll?’

Malachi?

The old perv from the playground?

I glanced at Lexi, who didn't get it either, though her face was a little brighter than before. She sat down on the rack and I joined her...then realized what Nick meant. I leaned into her ear, saying, 'Juana's like a drug addict, probably taking more than she physically needs. A lot more.'

'Actually, she's depressed,' replied Nick, moving over to the crimson altar and picking up the *Munich Manual*. 'The brain addiction is a consequence of that.'

'Depressed about what?'

'The caffè?'

'Dude, I'm not the high priest of explanations. Or a human psychologist. But all that brain eating, feasting, risk-taking, whatever you wanna call it...was a suicide run, basically.'

'Suicide...'

'Juana?'

Nick coughed, flicking through a few pages of the Manual. 'Yeah, the root of it, no idea. Or some idea...that I can't be bothered explaining. But I do know she'll feel a lot better when we get her to Portland.'

'Sorry?'

'Portland, dude. The four of us. Team Juana.'

I gauged Lexi's hand reaction first, then her face. Maybe it was the comfort of the dungeon, but she seemed quiet serene. Jejune even. If that word meant what I thought it did.

'No more one-word questions, good. We'll leave tomorrow. Soon as Juana's capable.' He placed the *Munich Manual* back on the altar and headed along my side of the rack back to the steps. 'I'm putting *Lifeforce* on the big screen, if you wanna come back over?'

'Actually, we were gonna head to Lexi's place, try to get some-...'

'Give us thirty minutes,' said Lexi, cutting me off.

'You've got thirty-five.'

She offered back a monotone *okay* and watched him vanish up the steps, waiting for the sound of the door closing before turning round to the rack.

'I like that filmn,' she said, squeezing my fingers.

'Huh?'

'The vampire woman in it...'

'*Lifeforce?*'

'...is beautiful. Fearless. Doesn't care that she's naked all the way through.

Doesn't try to cover herself. I like that.'

'Okay...'

'Even if it was an all-male crew.'



Curved bench looking out at the Byrgius Crater embedded in metal-grid ceiling,
though I knew it wasn't really

it was just that gap between the eighth dream and reality

Stahlian reality

and a few screams of drift-cascade later

mixed reality

or ambivalent reality if I went with matching *A* word

and then, with eyes staggered open

back room of video caffè reality

shadowed

pale

little bit cold.

'Kuso...'

The duvet was absent from my body and, flipping over onto my right side, I
saw why; it was wrapped around Lexi again, tight as a Mexican-made burrito, same

trick she always did. Whining a bit performatively, I pulled some back, despite not being that cold, and thought about running a finger down the tabs of her spines.

Maybe not a good idea.

She was still wearing her t-shirt from the night before, one of the *Tenebrae* work ones she kept in the other room.

And I was still in my [reclaimed] *Damijana Cbu* hoodie.

The symbolism was transparent...to me...owner of the cursed double brain. *Could not be bothered to fuck*. Or in my case, too anxious to attempt it. Even pushing into the mattress and picturing the naked space vampire from *Lifeforce* didn't spark anything. Nor did staring at the nine-tenths naked Sci-Fi queen flaking off my top.

Was this the experiment?

Delayed side effects?

I drifted over Lexi's back and went up and down the spines of the stacked DVD cases. It was similar to looking at my mum's living room. The other one...not in Liverpool, Japan...my Japanese mum.

Was I close to her?

Or had I been, before the experiment?

Unlikely, given how I could barely picture her face.

Lexi made a moaning sound, hopefully not sexual, and turned to face the ceiling. Her hand foraged for mine and found it, slotting fingers through the gaps.

The eyes stayed closed.

Then opened cat-like at the knock on the door.

I sat up, accidentally doing a stomach crunch, and grunted *good morning* at Nick, who was already pushing the thing open.

'Go time,' he said, frowning at something on the bed.

'Juana...' said Lexi, pulling the duvet back up across her shoulders.

'Drinking coffee in the caffè.'

'She's okay?'

‘Like yesterday never happened. Come on, up. The sun’s already halfway across and we’ve got a lot of road to cover.’

‘To Portland?’

‘Of course. In a roundabout way.’ He slapped a hand against the door, accidentally taking down a corner of the STAFF ONLY sign [made of rice-paper].

‘Why are neither of you moving?’

Both Lexi and I stayed tight under the duvet, apparently too coy to show even our t-shirts.

‘Ahh...couple of prudes. Fine, door closing. But if you’re not up in the next two minutes, I’m coming in and dragging you out.’

‘We’re coming...’ I said, sticking a leg out.

Fucking alien dad.

No...alien drill instructor.

Tyrant.

+++

After grabbing a quick breakfast from the caffè supplies, we got in our alien overlord’s [borrowed] vintage KIA stinger and hit the road again.

His tentative plan was to head straight up towards Sacramento, keep following the Five-Way then deviate onto the 97 and stay the night in one of those novelty-themed small town hostels. The reasoning was logical enough; just going up the same monster highway for almost twelve hours would end him, especially as he refused to let anyone else drive.

As usual though, the plan quickly disintegrated, this time at the hands of Lexi and myself. And our logic was even stronger: we’d been wearing the same t-shirts for the last two days and didn’t have any replacements.

‘No problem, I can buy you both new stuff,’ Nick offered, casually flicking a licorice stick he’d taken from the caffè out the window.

‘My flat’s two blocks west at the next junction,’ shot back Lexi, arms draped over the top of both front seats, eyes on the road ahead.

‘That’s very precise.’

‘We’ll just pop in quick, grab Mark’s luggage, grab some of my clothes...’

‘And your language books.’

Lexi paused, shifting to Nick’s side of the windscreen.

‘After all this, you’re still alarmed?’ he asked, taking out a new licorice stick and shoving two thirds of it straight in his mouth.

‘How do you know about my language books?’

‘Ha, that’s a yes then. Don’t worry, Lexitron, I’m not a stalker. It’s all that memory residue up there, from the surgery I performed. Sorry...surgeries.’

‘Residue...’

‘You know, thinking about it...from a human perspective, I mean...it is a fairly intrusive act. Fiddling with someone’s brain. If you want, I can let you do it to me? Balance things up a little.’

‘Why would you-...what other memory residue did you see?’

‘But then...the logistics of that...with your limited natural abilities...’

‘What else did you see?’

‘Fuck...a bit loud there, Lexitron.’

Hearing the same feral tone, I put a hand on Lexi’s hoodie sleeve and, as expected, got swatted off immediately.

‘I’m not Lexitron. What else did you look at in my brain?’

‘Still a bit loud.’

‘What else? Tell me.’

Juana took a break from putting cream over the weird yellow marks around her mouth and turned to the back seat. ‘*Relájate querida*. He didn’t get it from your memories. I told him.’

‘Told him...you?’

‘*Si*. He wanted to know more about your life.’

‘What?’

‘Why?’ I asked, pushing into the gap between the front seats, half reflex, half tactical [to stop Lexi springing forward and doing something stupid].

‘He wanted to know what books I had in my bedroom? He asked you that directly?’

‘Si.’

‘And you told him?’

‘Si.’

‘But...why?’ came out of my mouth again, a little dumber this time.

Nick chewed off the end of the licorice and tossed it out the window, smiling when it hit the back window of the car next to us. ‘Truthfully...I was considering hijacking Lexi’s brain. Making her my next identity after this one. Putting her in the old ice bucket and...siding up to young Keni here.’

There was no point to any of us saying *what*, even Juana.

‘Joking. Comrades are always off limits. Triton rule.’

‘*Kuso...*’

‘And sorry Juana, but you’re wrong. I actually did pick it up from your brain, Lexi, when I was helping you deal with your bathtub ordeal. You studying four different languages at the same time, the books in your room. Then I asked Juana and she confirmed it. Yeah, don’t do victim face again. I didn’t dig out anything else, I swear.’ He paused, tapping another licorice stick against his lips. ‘Which doesn’t mean much cos technically I could be lying and you wouldn’t know a thing about it. None of you would. But the language aspect, the skill level...that’s just a potentialism thing, right? You’re not actually fluent in any of them, you just want to be on the way to it.’

Lexi slouched back in the seat and gave herself over to the window.

‘It’s quite admirable, really...that kind of task-setting.’

‘You missed the turn,’ she said, moving to fold her arms then changing her mind and half crossing them awkwardly instead.

‘Not a problem.’

He swerved into the other lane and headed back, flicking a half-chewed licorice stick at the only car that bothered to beep at him.

‘Fucking lunatic...’ Lexi said, pushing herself back up.

‘Yeah, don’t know how they can even get a license. Reaction time of a fucking koala. Which street are you on again?’

+++

It took a little longer than advertised to shift all our stuff out of Lexi’s flat, mostly cos she spent the first seven minutes standing monk-still in the living room, fixated on a wall she claimed was weird in some way then, after that was done, took me by the hand to her room and blurted out in a controlled whisper how fucking annoying Nick was sometimes.

‘You mean just now?’

‘Beyond annoying. Patting me on the head like a dog cos I’m learning languages, then saying I’m not fluent in any of them...as if he knows what my level is.’

‘Yeah, that was pretty weird.’

‘What he really wanted to say was, ah, all three of us are fluent in something and you’re not. You, Juana and him. But he’s got the purple shit, the alien thing...that’s why he’s fluent in all this. Or it probably is.’

I picked up her Japanese study book, flicking through some random pages. ‘Only reason I know Japanese is cos of a failed science experiment. It’s not any kind of talent on my part, trust me.’

‘I mean, he’s okay sometimes, like last night in the Nightmare Castle dungeon, for about five seconds, but...then he gets whimsical and starts trying to wind us up.’

‘Maybe we should ask him more alien questions.’

‘It’s weird...like, one minute he’s trying to keep us all together, saying we have to save Juana, and the next minute he’s calling you a weakling, and me dumb and emotional.’

‘Or just block him out?’

‘Like he’s schizophrenic or something. Yeah, block him out, good idea. Just me and you in a back seat bubble.’

‘We can practice Japanese...’ I said, holding up the study book.

‘Or Portuguese. He doesn’t speak that.’

‘Me neither.’

‘And if he does, we switch to Slovene. There’s no way he’ll know that one.’

I closed the book and looked towards the bed...pictured the two of us merged with each other, her telling me to hold her tight...then switched quickly to the door.

‘Ah, we better get down there, before he decides to come up,’ said Lexi, grabbing her half-packed rucksack.

‘Right.’

In the corridor outside, a door opened and, ten seconds later, the TV came on. Followed by inaccurate Japanese sounds mimicked by what I assumed was Lexi’s flat mate.

‘Fuck...’ she muttered, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

‘Your flat mate?’

‘Thought he’d sleep later.’

‘Well...at least now you don’t have to send him a message.’

+++

Back in the car, Nick must’ve telepathically detected Lexi’s rant upstairs cos, as soon as the doors shut, he admitted with *caught cop* face that his own language skills were basically implanted.

‘The purple?’ Lexi asked back, almost a grunt.

‘And Keni only speaks two languages due to a botched science experiment. So, compared to us, you’re doing pretty well.’

I laughed, provoking a quizzical look from Nick, then asked Juana if she needed to stop off and get more clothes.

‘I’m fine.’

‘You got enough from the *café*?’ asked Lexi.

‘Two dresses, and this one.’

‘Wah...’

‘No need to panic, *querida*. My plan is to buy in Portland. Upgrade my wardrobe to something more seasonal. Nick said he’s going to do the same.’

For the eyes of Sadia was my initial response, but I didn’t put roots on it. No way of telling how much that level of directness would debilitate her.

‘Any more stops you want to make?’ asked Nick, pulling out of Lexi’s street and onto the main road.

‘Nope.’

‘Juana?’

‘*No, soy buena.*’

He smiled, taking both hands off the wheel and stretching upwards. ‘Good, good. Then it’s Oakland in about two hours, comrades.’

+++

Despite Nick’s slight mellowing-stroke-confessional, Lexi and I spent the first hour sticking to what we’d planned out in her flat, which was practicing beginner level Portuguese.

Juana and Nick mostly stayed out of it, watching the grape farms roll by, the AH-bots propped up by the KEV-poles, recharging for their afternoon shifts.

Occasionally, Juana would say ‘eh?’ and turn back, telling us that something we just said sounded like Spanish.

‘About seventy per cent’s the same, right?’ asked Lexi, for some reason facing me.

‘*Não sabe,*’ I muttered, quickly scanning the phrases on my phone.

‘What?’

‘*Não sabe?*’

‘*Não sei,*’ she corrected, checking her own phone. ‘That’s what I read anyway. Around seventy per cent the same, but the sounds are a bit different. I could be wrong though. Juana, how much can you understand?’

‘Of what you said?’

‘*Sim.*’

‘*No sé.* Most of it sounds like Russian to me.’

‘Fifty per cent? Less?’

‘Less...definitely.’

Lexi looked at her phone and read out a sentence in a pretty strong Portuguese accent. ‘That one?’

‘You don’t want to go to work?’

‘Ah, you *can* understand.’

‘It’s correct, really? Wah, the stars must be aligned...cos all the other things you said were just gibberish to-...’

Nick cut in with a librarian’s cough and told us that Oakland was now only fifty kilometres away, so get prepared, physical and mentally. When that didn’t get much of a response, he coughed again, louder, more wretched, and launched into what I quickly realized would be a monologue. One that started with, ‘you might know this, Keni, from that book you read, but you other two...’

As with most Nick tangents during the past week or so, I had almost no idea what he was talking about at first, or second or third, but then he name-dropped Jeff Fahey and anarchism, and I managed to get a foothold. Apparently, around fifteen years earlier, most of the Oakland district had morphed into the skeleton of an anarcho-communist collective, even more radical than Liverpool’s or the ones in Ghana, and the adventurists of that time...the capitalists...could do fuck all about it. The people were a unit, coordinating with local farms and utilities, buying enough of

their own properties to keep a solid grip on the area, and staying strong and united when the cop-agents were sent in.

‘But the one thing the capitalists always have...’ said Nick, chewing on his seven hundredth licorice stick, ‘...is patience.’

‘And capital,’ I added, sarcastic enough for the words to go nowhere.

The sermon giver coughed, threw away the licorice stick, continued.

‘Slowly the fox-faced fuckers wormed their way back in. Starting on the fringes...buying up unused land, abandoned car parks, strip malls...then moving in on the core, which, in the case of Oakland, meant the Ervin Complex. They utilized their supreme weapons, the unrivalled enervators. Plastic shit. Burgers. Coupons. Capital as well, obviously, and others too, but I’ve forgotten...to be honest, it’s been a while since I read about it. But this is pure devilry we’re driving into, guys...the evil of your system, what it does to a place.’

‘There was a similar thing in LA,’ said Lexi, taking a break from her window vigil. ‘Got co-opted, gentrified.’

‘Oh?’

‘Before I was there.’

‘In Redundant Beach?’

‘*Sim.*’

‘Hmm, very sad. Very, very sad. What was it you did there again?’

‘Construction.’

‘Ha, funny. No, but what did you do there, really? And how miserable was it that it made you go back to a nowhere place like Fresno?’

‘Construction,’ Lexi repeated, staring at Nick through the windscreen mirror, holding the stare until he looked away.

‘Just a question, Lexitron.’

The words drifted through the car without response from anyone.

Juana started humming a melody with occasional Spanish inserts, possibly a ploy to lighten the mood. Or to stop her own mood drifting to...other thoughts. Like

the vapour from that kid's brain the previous night. Or the possibility that the stuff she took from Nick's alien cortex wouldn't hold and at some point she'd...

Nah, too bleak.

Not a match with the blue sky outside.

And, besides, she was humming...jauntily...

I went back to my phone, switching tabs to *Big Brain Bakumin*, trying the first paragraph of *Why Bukharin Got Lost In Sociology*.

To my left, Lexi lost herself in the view outside, waiting out a good few minutes of North Cali signs and signifieds before coming back in and nudging me in the waist. 'You wanna try a different article?'

'Huh?'

'Not *BBB*. Portuguese. Something a little more challenging maybe.'

'Sure. *Si*.'

'*Sim*.'

'Yeah, that one.'

+++

Forty minutes later, Nick's previous monologue was put into stark visuals as the city of Oakland emerged.

Artisan shoppes interrupted by the odd *GUV Burger*, a whole strip of VR plazas flanked by related merch stalls, endless franchise stores that I recognized from LA and Fresno, and then the Ervin Complex, a huge, multi-layered construct with a huge banner hanging down from its roof, declaring in giant capitalized text: WHERE THERE IS REPRESSION, THERE IS RESISTANCE.

Below that was a branch of *HELL OH Coffee* trussed up with 1st generation Black Panther icons; the Fred Hampton face beaming like an evangelical, raised fist on one side, cartoon cup on the other [its face also beaming].

‘See what I mean?’ said Nick, steering us left onto a street where thankfully there were no more franchises.

‘Pretty bleak,’ I muttered, tapping Lexi’s arm to wake her up.

‘Colourful,’ said Juana, winding down the window.

‘What?’

‘Reminds me of Cuba.’

‘*Kuso*...Cuba?’

‘Good aesthetic. Vibrant.’

+++

It had been a while since breakfast, so we found a place that sold decent Mexican food, sat down and waited for Nick to say something random or needlessly provocative.

Or both combined.

Miraculously, it didn’t happen. He just sat there and stared off at the nearby roof of the Ervin Centre, saying how depressed Lorenzo would be if he were still alive.

‘Was he a famous anarchist?’ I asked, biting into my burrito and instantly dropping half the ingredients out the other end.

‘That is a contradictory question.’

‘It is?’

‘Or it should be. Didn’t you retain anything from the Fahey book?’

‘I flicked through it twice.’

He muttered something in Japanese, which I couldn’t quite catch...may have been *don’t bother*...then put his death glare on Lexi, who quickly asked him what kind of political system Triton had.

Laughing and offering a quick, 'clever girl,' he switched to Juana, who was using her little finger to rub sour cream off her lips, and, when that was cleared, venturing a little further to the mysterious yellow marks from earlier.

'What?' she asked, noticing the sudden attention.

'Just admiring your dress,' replied Nick, drinking some of his beer. 'Very summery.'

'That's because it was bought for summer.'

'Never seen you wear this one before,' said Lexi, leaning over and taking some of my coffee. I gave her a surprised look as she'd said she wasn't thirsty, but she just shrugged and took some more.

'Not much need for it at work. Besides, it was mostly for LA, when I lived there.'

'Working in the film industry,' finished Nick, flicking at the strap of her dress.

'... ..' shot back in Yaqui.

'Just a guess.'

'Actually...if you really want to know...I worked for an independent group. Kind of like one of those collectives you talked about. They had a four tier system for profit sharing, with very little gap in between. Beginners, semi-pro, supporting crew, core crew. It was quite interesting.'

'A business by any other name,' said Nick, drinking more of his beer.

'Is that why you like film so much?' I asked, the stack of DVD cases sliding back into my head.

'No, no...that was way before LA. But I suppose it did function as a similar thing. *Sì*, most of our filmns were pastiche, copied shots and techniques. Maybe it played a part... *no sé*.'

Lexi and I nodded and continued with our shared coffee. Wasn't sure about her, but I knew what I wanted to ask.

Did you eat any brains back then?

Or how exactly did you function for so long without getting caught?

But then I remembered what Nick had said the night before, how she didn't actually need to eat the whole brain to survive. Somehow, I'd forgotten about that. Possibly cos I'd seen her dunk a claw into someone's skull...and tell me to my face that she was going to do the same to mine.

What was that called? Phenomenological vs...the other one...the thing I'd pretended to study at unii...experience vs scientific fact?

Phenomenology and...

My brain sailed off, on one river to another river to a darker river to the mouth of the Acheron until Nick snapped his fingers right in front of my nose, informing me and the rest of the table that it was time to talk about the road trip.

'Err...okay.'

'You're listening?'

'Sim.'

'Good, cos I'll test you afterwards. If I can be bothered.'

I nodded, taking the coffee back from Lexi...and frowning when I saw that it was almost empty.

'Thirsty...' she whispered, some foam residue still on her top lip.

'Hey, Lexitron, Keni cat...road trip spiel incoming. Pay attention, okay?'

We both looked at Nick and said *sim*.

'You better.'

+++

According to our alien tour guide, the Five-Way shrieked grey and boring [his exact words], and so did Sacramento, therefore, the only option left was the green and mountainous route to Portland.

'Without any Serbian nationalists?' Lexi asked, taking the very last dregs of my second coffee.

'Or cyborg dogs?' I added, getting back an empty cup.

‘None. Zero.’

‘Wrong turns?’

‘No, no, no. Trust me. It’ll be very serene.’

+++

Serene was fairly accurate once we made it past the private toll gates for the 99, and the accompanying *shop while you wait* stalls, which as far as I could see sold mugs with about fifteen hundred different place names on the side, as well as poorly-made fruit and animal toys.

I was briefly tempted to get out of the car and buy a *Nonchalant Grape* for Lexi, more as a joke than anything, but then I saw the faded pink parts around the edges and stayed with my forehead against the window.

‘It’s only here cos of Lake Tahoe,’ Nick said, and Lexi confirmed it, telling us about the time her and a friend had come up on a tour and been practically forced off the coach to visit all the stalls.

Was that friend a guy, I wondered, and then a supplementary thought; did he ever have moments where he lost his sexual urge completely?

No, worse than that...did he ever go days without an erection?

I ran along that track for a good hour, watching signs go past for Emigrant Gap, Yuba City, Weed and then a giant one for the 97 Freeway, deciding at one point to just go in the next VR plaza and patch in to *Harem Survival 4*, rub against an onsen girl until something sparked up then rush back to the room and jump on Lexi. And if that didn’t work, just go into martyr mode and eat her out until she came, tell her it was my way of making it up to her for...something...a lack on my part...vague ennui.

Finally, my inner Materialist got a foothold and forced me back into the actual environment of the car; Nick was giving Juana a test on cult filmns, the current question being, who was the murdered student in *Even the Wind Is Afraid?*

‘Never heard of it,’ said Lexi.

‘Me neither,’ I added, repeating the filmn name in my head.

‘I’m looking at the plot synopsis on my phone,’ said Nick, only one finger on the wheel. ‘Definitely a real filmn.’

‘Andrea,’ said Juana to the passenger side window.

‘Correcto.’

‘Played by Pamela Susan Hall.’

‘Wah, also correct.’

‘...who died a few years ago.’

‘Hmm...that one I’ll have to check. Later.’

‘*Una cara tan joven.*’

Nick swiped at his phone for a few seconds, eyes still nowhere near the road, and finally came back up with a new question.

‘What does the alien want in *Liquid Sky*? And why?’

+++

As the sky got darker, and pinker, Nick told us that his alien battery was running low and eyeball constructs were on the verge of evaporation, so it might be for the best if we got off the road and checked into one of the themed hostels.

‘How much further to Portland?’ I asked, looking at a sign passing by that claimed Klamath Falls.

‘About five hours.’

‘Hostel, *por favor*,’ said Lexi, stretching back her shoulders.

‘Juana?’

‘Same. With comfortable bed.’

I didn’t seem to get a vote but said, ‘okay,’ anyway then sat back and continued with what I’d been doing for the last forty minutes; reading about the guy Nick had talked about earlier, Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin. There was a lot to choose from too.

According to *bakattack.io*, he was a strong anarchist who trod the opaque line between representing the black community and becoming ossified within it. He also spoke out about the proportionate argument, saying that the numbers of black prisoners in totality had almost surpassed whites, therefore, it was time to centre them instead of pandering to [white] summertime allies.

There was more, but it seemed heavily referential to things I'd never heard of, so I switched back to the window and saw that we'd stopped outside a long stretch of cabin-shacks, headed by a sign that had *WinterMute Hostel* in neon green valorax.

'Seems like your kind of place,' Nick said, patting Juana on her bare knee.

'Has a pool,' she replied, staring out the windscreen, looking at the same corner of water to the left that I had just noticed too.

'And a VR shack,' said Lexi, pushing open her door.

'Wah, what happened to comfortable bed?'

'Just noting the facilities.'

'I like to relax before sleeping,' added the Yaqui.

'And it was Juana who said *bed*, not me.'

'Water nearby helps that.'

'Ah, fast comebacks...at long last. Well, car park's empty. Hopefully, there's some vacant rooms too...that don't have dried cum stains on the floor.' Nick turned off the engine and addressed me and Lexi through the windscreen mirror. 'Don't worry, kids, everything's on the washed-up filmn star. His treat.'

+++

Either out of generosity or necessity, Nick got two rooms; one for him and Juana [in separate beds, I assumed], and one for me and Lexi, with a surprisingly soft double bed and two heart-shaped cushions with HEART sewed on front and back.

No hardcore porn shots, thank gods, but [apart from the cushions] the place did have a clear theme; Neo-Cyberpunk. Reflected in radium tube kanji on the walls,

logo prints for futuristic-sounding things like *Kabuki Intrasolar* and *Geisha Bank*, and the opening line of *Neuromancer* printed out above the TV. With *deed channel* instead of *dead*. And *poor* in place of *port*.

Well, the intent was there. And the novel was pretty old...

Dressing down to *Kung Food Fighting* t-shirt and knickers, Lexi lay coffin-flat on the bed and watched an old horror I'd never heard of called *The Long Hair Of Death*, while I sat with my back against the bed wall, still in pants and *Damijana Chu* hoodie, reading Chapter 22 of *Moon Prison*.

'It's the same actress from *Nightmare Castle*,' she said at one point, without highlighting any one of the five characters on screen.

'The game?'

'No, the filmn.'

'Oh.'

'She played Lavinia Goddess Of Death too...but they used a different model for the game version, sadly.'

'Her?'

'The one on the left. Barbara Steele. With the big eyes...'

I looked and this time isolated the woman with half her face covered in long black hair...possibly of death...and a giant, hypnotic eyeball.

'She's so beautiful...gothic and distant and...all of it.'

'I guess.'

Lexi repeated the line and then gave a brief biography about how Steele had starred in dozens of Italian horror filmns but never spoke Italian, which used to impress her when she was in high school but now seemed a bit arrogant as she was working in their country, with Italian actors and crew, how hard would it have been to learn at least up to intermediate level?

'They must've been mesmerized by her eyes...'

'Yeah.'

'Or her body.'

Lexi glanced across...and then reached out a hand to push aside *Moon Prison*.

'Yeah?'

'Do you think Juana's okay?'

'Seems stable enough.'

'You think she's nervous about seeing Sadia tomorrow?'

'Don't know. Probably.'

'Are you nervous?'

'Me?'

'You or the pillow.'

I checked under my crossed legs, prodding the pillow case, trying to give myself time to think of an answer.

'You must've liked her if you came all the way to Fresno.'

'That was Nick's idea.'

'Was it?'

'To come to California, with him. Yeah, a hundred per cent. I mean, there was also a family issue that kind of...pushed me that way...but Nick's the one who jumped on it, got the plane tickets.'

'So...you weren't planning to meet Sadia?'

'Meet her? Maybe. For a coffee or something.'

'Nothing else?'

'If she wasn't freaked out that I turned up. I mean, I don't even know her really. Just online. A few messages on a writing website.'

'What about tomorrow?'

'Portland?'

'You'll get to meet her for real. Talk to her.'

'I'll probably stay in the car.'

'Serious?'

'Let Juana have her moment. Hang back a bit. A lot. In the car. With you. Hopefully not Nick. I don't know.'

Lexi stared at the *Geisha Bank* logo near the window for almost a whole minute, probably trying to piece together my ridiculously fragmented answer. Then the giant eyeball woman shrieked on screen and she did an abrupt pivot back, watching the scene play out. The husband walling up his wife and her gardener lover. When the last brick was in, she turned back to the bed, nudging *Moon Prison* up towards my face. 'Do your homework. I'm going back to the filmn.'

'Good luck,' I replied, returning to Chapter 22 and wondering why I'd just said such an odd line.

A couple of scenes later, Lexi paused the filmn and said she was thirsty.

'There's a drinks machine outside.'

'I know.'

My eyes stayed with the book for three, four seconds before feeling the mesmerism cloud and drifting across towards the door...then doing a slow dolly back to take in my fully clothed body. 'You want me to get you something?'

'If you're thirsty too.'

'Little bit.'

'Good. Then I'll have a no sugar lemon drink. Any brand. *Kudasai*.'

'Sounds tasty...' I said, putting *Moon Prison* flat on the duvet and leaning down to my shoes.

'And don't sneak into the VR shack without me.'

'Not likely.'

'I mean it. I'll be annoyed if you do.'

'No, I mean it too. The prices are insane. I'd be broke after an hour.'

'And if the prices were reasonable?'

'Err...then I still wouldn't go. Cos it's no fun without you.'

She nodded, said a word I didn't know in Portuguese, and went back to the eyeball woman on the screen.

'Was that the correct answer?'

+++

Outside, the Neo-Cyberpunk theme of the hostel continued, with various shades of neon represented on the exterior walls, on the windows, and even on the trunks of some of the thicker trees. Plus another *Kabuki Intrasolar* logo, this one on a half-torn sticker... next to bird-shit staining a faded pink patio tile.

Kuso...seemed like an okay place...but look closely enough...

I walked with hands in hoodie pockets, half thinking about Sadia as a silhouette without a face, half wondering if Lexi understood that I saw *her* as my girlfriend and that this no erection, no eros thing was really fucking me up. Intermittently fucking me up. Every now and then. Though, weirdly, it had been fairly comfortable on the bed just now. Her semi-naked. Me dressed for autumn. Neither of us making any hint of a move.

Maybe it wasn't fucking me up as much as I thought?

Or at all.

But...wouldn't that be a bad thing?

A couple who never had sex?

The drinks machine loomed ahead, robot-shaped, snapping me out of my self-made puzzle box.

No sugar lemon drink.

Large carton.

Check.

Luckily, it accepted my Liverpool card, though it did seem to buffer a while getting to that point.

Maybe a dig at our collectivism?

Half-assed as it was.

I bent down to take the drink and then turned left and walked the long way back around the hostel.

The pool was nearby, shaped like a four-leaved clover [not very Cyberpunk, owner must've run out of ideas] and I thought my hybrid-real brain had to be hallucinating when I saw Juana sitting on the edge of the shallow end, bare feet dipped in the water, white summer dress rolled up almost to her crotch, eyes glistening yellow.

A few more steps, some rapid blinking.

Nope, she was real.

I raised my hand to wave, but she hadn't noticed me at all. In fact, she seemed more concerned with bending down to the pool surface and splashing water over her hands and forearms.

Relapse?

Argument with Nick?

She still wasn't looking up and I was already past her so I kept going, turning through a little passage with *welcome* kanji above a little arch, the cracked tube flickering green, dark, green, dark, green, dark, green...

Intentional decay?

I'd seen it in some cyberpunk films, anti-adventurist symbolism, but...the way this one was flickering...the crack placement...

Unless...

Intentional trashing of radium tube to evoke decay? Similar to the mangled *Neuromancer* quote?

Maybe.

+++

When I got back to the room, the light on Lexi's side of the bed was off, her back was turned to the door, and the TV was muted.

I put the carton down on her bedside table and whispered, 'no sugar lemon.'

There was a moaning sound, but nothing coherent.

Moving to the bottom of the bed, I picked up the remote and changed back to the *GENTE* + menu screen.

Doctor Who was my first thought, nostalgia reflex, but then another name sauntered in: *Dead Bitch On Pluto*. Nick Stahl's cult masterpiece.

Then a different name...an old one...*Alien*.

Then *Aliens*.

Then *Beyond the Rabbit Hole*.

Then *Portals & Portals*.

Then *I'm All Alone In The Kuiper Belt And That's Okay*.

Then *Solaris*.

Then *Void Galaxia*.

Then-

I put the remote down and rubbed my head, trying to stop random filmn names barging in and bulldozing my neurons into grit and diodes...

Infinite Atom Mall. Alien. Void Galaxia. Long Hair Of Death. Puppet Master 2. Re-Animator. Heathers. Solaris. Planet Dark. Doctor Who. Alien. Moon Factory 7. Portals & Portals. I'm All Alone In The Kuiper Belt And That's Okay. Doctor Who. Void Galaxia. Planet Dark. Long Hair of Death. Infinite Atom Mall. Heathers. Nightmare Castle. Puppet Master 2. Hellraiser. House of Clocks. Kip's Place. Reagan Cult Hangout. Alien. Portals & Portals. Solaris. Nightmare Castle. Beyond The Rabbit Hole. Planet Dark. Moon Factory 7. Hellraiser. Kip's Place. Solaris. I'm All Alone In The Kuiper Belt And That's Okay. Dead Bitch On Pluto. Planet Dark...

I got up and walked drunkenly into the bathroom, turned the shower on and dipped my head under cold water.

Finally, the trivia deluge subsided.

Probably the two brain thing, I told myself, returning to the bed and switching off the TV without looking at any more filmn cards.

Or some of Nick's purple shit manipulating my cortexes.

Assuming he lied about never touching me with it.

Taking off the *Damijana Chu* hoodie, the *Planet Dark* t-shirt [that was starting to smell pretty bad], the template pants, I set myself down on top of the duvet so as not to disturb Lexi – she was on top of it too, limbs sprawled out like an Ondōan – and picked up *Moon Prison*.

No, probably the two brain thing, I decided.

That was the proven one.

The thing that actually, definitely happened.

At least that was what my brain was telling me.

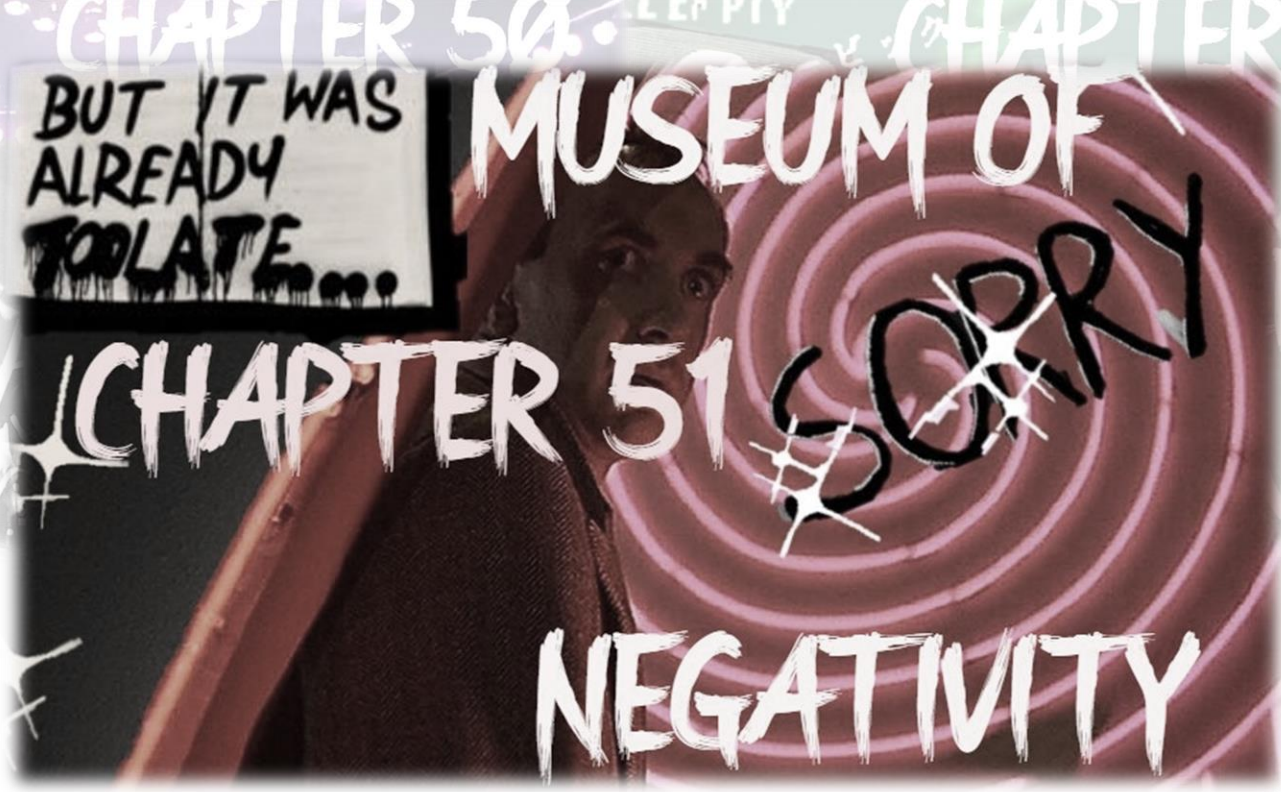
‘*Moon Prison*, Keni. Focus.’

I skimmed down to the part I remembered being up to and continued reading, scanning, absorbing, stamping the words into my haze-fragmented brain-scape.

Brain-scoop.

Brain-scrap.

Brain-sc



Third loop around Engineering
no sign of loose wire
or suicide plaque
yet the ship insisted both were there so
the body kept moving
ignoring the AH-bot cleaning the spanner box
and a little further on found Charlie
who said the loose wire wasn't that loose anymore
she'd fixed it with Asami's help, over on Deck Twenty-Seven an hour ago.
'Where is she now?'
'I'm going to the Arka Room, you should come too.'
'Asami?'
'Best seat's by the port window.'
Body backed off and hit the wall and when it turned I saw a poster saying
SAVE ALL AH-BOTS YA-BOTS EK-BOTS
EVEN THE GLIB ONES

and to the left lay the snacks table

Sadia and Juana on top, hugging each other, Nick nearby reading *Neuro-Maker*

pair of floating yellow eyes

Lyotard, Yosh & Baudrillard

everyone watching my form and field and

a voice behind, Asami the Tease, keep going, keep going, keep

‘What?’

‘All of it, Keni, get it in, deeper.’

Vaguely knowing what she meant, I looked down and saw a fifteen-inch dick that was ostensibly attached to my body, pole-hard, going in and out of a pink mannequin’s cunt

metronomic rhythm

fingers stuck in the

+++

‘Armitage announced an eighty-hour stay in Zion. Molly and Case would practice in zero gravity, he said, and acclimatize themselves to working in it.’

The words were both smooth and bizarro, fitting with the blur of slipstream Id and beginnings of the hostel room reforming around me.

I closed one eye. Opened the other.

The neon was gone, thank gods, and so was Lexi.

Replaced by canned audio.

‘He’d found him curled like a cat on a thin pad of temperfoam, naked, apparently asleep, his head orbited by a revolving halo of small, white geometric forms, cubes, spheres, and pyramids.’

I pulled myself up and, in the process, managed to accidentally topple *Moon Prison* onto the floor. Apparently, I’d been reading it right up until I fell asleep.

Couldn’t remember what chapter I’d reached though.

Or what happened after Chapter 22.

Ah well, just read back until something clicked.

'Cyberspace, as the deck presented it, had no particular relationship with the deck's physical whereabouts.'

Kuso...

What the fuck was this voice?

In-house alarm clock?

Rolling awkwardly out of bed, I seized the remote and looked for the button to silence it. After several failures, I tried the one that said *Gib Call* and the voice ended.

'Peace...' I muttered, grabbing yesterday's t-shirt off the carpet and pulling it on. Then smelling the armpits and taking it off. My suitcase was laid out on the floor, open, so I sifted through a bit until the *Don't Get Cyber, MAN* t-shirt materialised, smiled and threw it on.

Next step: locate Lexi.

Pray she's not with Nick.

Or Juana.

Or a good-looking Japanese guy.

In a less obscure t-shirt.

+++

A quick loop of a very low-key...no, practically deserted...WinterMute Hostel led me to the pool round back and Lexi doing lengths, from the looks of it [the strap visible on her shoulder] back in the Lake Arrowhead *Coffy* piece.

Like Juana the night before, she didn't notice me, so I sat down on one of the plastic chairs and watched her.

It was quite funny, she was doing breaststroke, but in a child's way, with her head refusing to dip beneath the surface. Ryu used to do the same thing. Said he didn't like the chlorine getting in his eyes. And when I told him to wear goggles, he said, don't like chlorine getting in those either.

Maybe Lexi was the same.

‘A very energetic Lexitron today...’ said Nick, not appearing next to me but seemingly already present on the adjacent chair, torso covered in an incredibly vintage *Kontolian Intrigue* t-shirt.

‘You’re up.’

‘In the bikini I gave her too. Very touching. Wah...of course I’m up, K cat. It *is* morning.’

‘Where’s Juana?’ I asked, scanning the pathway at the far end of the hostel.

‘Watching *Robocop 2*. You write anything last night?’

‘Sorry?’

‘Something on par with the glory that is *Moon Prison*?’

‘Ah, that kind of writing. No.’

‘Hmm. Bad habits, Keni. *Yellow Muon Blob* won’t write itself.’

‘Err...’

‘And it must be written, on planet or off, just like Aziz and *Kool Kool Crystal Grab*. Not that *Yellow Muon Blob*’s on that level, but targets, ambition, discipline, vitality, all very important.’

I wasn’t sure what to say, the pace of the conversation was moving too fast and my brain was still in fade mode. Should I just look at the pool? Or tell him I hadn’t touched *Yellow Muon Blob* since LA?

There was noise nearby, a louder than normal splash of water. Then a shout of *obayo gozaimasu*.

Pulling out the bottom of my t-shirt to fan myself, I looked across.

Lexi had spotted us and was now swimming over.

Nick must’ve been watching her too as he didn’t add anything about the stillborn novel. Just sat there, pinching different parts of the Kontolian face on his t-shirt.

‘Are we leaving soon?’ Lexi asked, popping up on the pool curb, eyes slightly red.

‘When Juana’s done with her filmn.’

Lexi wiped the one or two droplets off her face. ‘Which one?’

‘A brainless fascist cartoon. Sequel.’

‘Fuck, not-...’

‘Afraid so, comrade.’

‘But she’s-...’

‘I know.’

+++

An hour later, after *Robocop 2* had finished, we all traipsed out to the car and quickly settled into the same positions as the previous day’s travel.

Lexi was out of the bikini and into a t-shirt I’d never seen before - *Kollontai Shoe* in cursive text and a print of what may have been Leningrad – while Juana was cropped in another summery dress [bluebells & ecru], with sunglasses on, and those weird yellow marks around her mouth gone completely. Maybe it was the result of a good night’s sleep, or the hand scrubbing in the pool the previous night, I had no idea, but she looked vibrant, buoyant, the polar opposite of the wreck on the couch moaning through *Hellraiser* two days earlier.

‘You feeling okay today?’ asked Lexi, lining up her phone and taking a picture of Juana from the side.

‘Better.’

‘No side effects? Headache?’

‘Side effe-...you mean from sleeping?’

‘Err...’

‘Yeah, I may have exaggerated the weirdness of my brain,’ tagged in Nick, guiding the car back out onto the 97. ‘Seems like it’s merging quite smoothly now.’

‘... ..?’

‘Spanish, please.’

‘¿de qué estás hablando?’

‘The procedure I did...the other night. In the video caffè.’

Juana scratched the spots around her mouth where the yellow marks had been, then stared out the side window.

‘You don’t remember?’ asked Lexi, leaning round the back of Juana’s seat.

‘Of course, she does.’

Juana?’

The Mexican ex-cannibal put a finger up to the window then altered course at the last second, scratching around her mouth again.

‘You remember or...’

‘Nick fixed me. With his hands.’

‘That’s it?’

The horn beeped suddenly, Nick leaning out the window and shouting at a truck parked at the side of the road to get out of the way. Muttering a little bit extra under his breath, he came back in and told Juana it was okay, Lexi probably didn’t remember much about her brain ops either.

‘You mean the purple stuff...in Lake Arrowhead?’

‘That’s one way of saying it.’

‘I remember bits of it...’

‘But no exact details, right?’

Lexi looked at the side of Juana’s head, then down to one of the larger bluebells on her summery dress.

‘Well, Juana’s had a direct transplant...vapour transfer, embedding...which is about ten times more nebulous. Much harder to come to terms with too. Though there is a chance...her demon physiology is helping with the transition...that would explain the lack of relapse we’re seeing.’

My thoughts appeared on the back window, *lack of? She was scrubbing her hands in the pool last night, with yellow eyes*, but there was no point saying that. A] cos the pool

performance could've been totally innocent and, b] it might make me look like a perv for spying on her.

'What about your physiology?' I asked instead, shifting over to the central part of the back seat.

'Mine?'

'Yeah,' said Lexi, shifting closer to the middle too, bare thigh stopping against mine, 'how different is it from humans?'

'Ah, back to the interrogation lab.'

'Not that serious. Just friends asking a friend.'

Nick smiled at the windscreen mirror. 'Okay...friends. It's hard to say.'

'Come on, dude...' I said, trying and failing to render his accent.

'Ha, not bad.'

'Thanks. We are in California.'

Lexi laughed, knocking her shoulder into mine. 'You're about fifty years out of date.'

'Huh?'

'Come on, dude...'

'She's right, Keni. Dude is an archaic word. I've moved on now.'

'Ah, so it was an affectation?' continued Lexi, putting her hand forward and starting the twisting process on a long strip of Juana's hair.

'Don't tangle it,' was all Juana offered in defence.

'I won't.'

'Affectation is an imprecise word,' continued Nick, ducking his head closer to the windscreen and looking up at the sign passing by above. 'A little too detached...distant. It's more like-...or kind of similar to-...or not that different from-...ah, explanations, too fucking exhausting. Basically, each time I take a new form, the purple transfers some of that brain's speech patterns to my own. But I also retain some of those that were borrowed from previous forms...existing in previous eras...which means, it can get quite jumbled at times.'

‘So *dude* was from Nick Stahl’s brain?’ I asked, watching Lexi knot together Juana’s hair.

Nick nodded at the wing mirror. ‘I quickly realized it was outdated...especially after I used it on Lexi and her face got all scrunched up...and since then I’ve been trying to slowly phase it out. But then you still need some kind of substitute phrase...something more up-to-date...’

‘Guys?’ I offered.

‘Comrades?’ tried Lexi.

‘*Equipo?*’

‘Hmm. All are possible, and perhaps none. I’ll have to monitor my speech, see what comes out...see what other people say. Though I would have to say comrades might be the early frontrunner.’

Lexi finished the knot and let Juana’s twisted hair untwirl of its own accord.

‘What about your physiology?’

‘Didn’t I answer that one?’

‘No. You evaded. Again.’

‘And you’re my personal records keeper. Okay. *Bueno*. But it really is quite hard to say.’

‘Try.’

‘Is your body the same shape as ours?’ I prompted, quickly editing *body* to *real body*. ‘A similar design?’

‘On Triton, just a few neurons and cortexes different. Here, with the purple...there is a level of protection...physical and mental. A Specialty.’

‘You mean...on Triton, you can’t do the-...’

Nick coughed, cutting me off. ‘In the simplest terms...for the sake of my annoyingly pushy human audience...the purple assists me. Keeps me sane. And down here...it keeps me safe *and* sane. On a pedestal, if you will. With the lightest of monitoring. Not that I would ever need an intervention. As you’ve seen, I am a very

disciplined type, especially compared to what a human would do in my position...with these abilities.'

'What about the others of your kind?' asked Lexi, using my knee as a prop to adjust herself into a more comfortable position.

'It is the same.'

'They come here too, to Earth?'

'No.'

'They stay on Triton?'

'... ..' Nick murmured in no language I'd ever heard before.

'They don't stay on Triton?'

'Interrogation lab closed.'

'You mean you don't know?'

'Quiet time.'

'Dude...'

'No exceptions.'

Lexi whistled out breath more than melody then shifted position back over to the side of Juana's seat. Starting on a new strand of the Mexican's hair, she gave a terse, 'I know,' when I leaned in to her neck and told her that other aliens and their whereabouts might be a sore topic.

'... ..' slurred Juana in Yaqui, reaching her hand back and tapping Lexi on the fingertips. 'You'll mess it up.'

'Sorry.'

Tucking the stray hair back in behind the seat, Juana turned to Nick. 'How far until Portland?'

'Now that we're all focused on the road, shouldn't be too long.'

'How many hours?'

'Ha, detail whore. Okay. Another three to the Five-Way, then...assuming no traffic...about an hour and a half from there.' He slowed the car down and shifted to

the outside lane. 'In fact, we're so far ahead of schedule, I believe we can make a quick pit stop in this little toy town up here.'

'Pit stop? We just started.'

'Which town?' I asked, not seeing any signs.

'Bend.'

'The what?'

'Town's name...Bend...obviously.'

'What's there?'

'Don't know, comrade, I've never been. But I am quite curious.'

'About how small it is?'

Nick laughed and turned off the freeway, slapping the steering wheel and shouting, 'Bend, comrades!' out the window.

'Wah, we're really going there?'

'Just for a little while.'

'No, no...*no podemos*...we have to go to Portland,' rambled Juana, pulling at her own hair now, basically doing the same thing she'd just ordered Lexi to stop with.

'Think of it as research, comrade.'

'*Por qué?* For what? I don't understand.'

'Neither do I,' said Lexi from the back, nudging me in the side with her elbow.

'Err...me neither,' I muttered, elbowing back.

Nick looked at us both through the windscreen mirror, tilting his head like one of those 70's sci-fi actors trying to portray *possessed*. 'What if I told you a young, pretty girl called Sadia stopped off in Bend a few weeks back?'

'Sadia...'

'Don't you want to know what she looked at?'

Both Lexi and I dropped the elbow code and looked at each other. I didn't know exactly what she was thinking but it probably wasn't far off my current track of *was this real, and what did it matter why she stopped there, she was in Portland right now*.

Or maybe it was something else...something violent, vengeful...

Whatever it was, it was muted instantly as Juana said, ‘just for a little while,’ and that was pretty much that. Discussion over. Interrogation lab closed.

We were going to Bend.

+++

Driving in alongside the river, I quickly realized it wasn’t a small town we were visiting but a fairly well-stacked city with a pretty green backdrop and the expected Californian array of overpriced Taco places.

‘Extinct Volcano over there,’ said Nick, pointing off towards the left. ‘You can walk up to the top. Peek down into the magma chamber.’

‘Non active...right?’

‘Correct, Lexitron.’

‘*Foda*. I’m not...’

‘At least that’s what the blurb says.’

‘...Lexitron.’

‘Did Sadia go up there?’ asked Juana, untangling a clump of hair that Lexi had just finished with.

‘Possibly.’

‘You can’t sense it?’

‘Rationalism, comrade. I’m following her general trace, not her literal footsteps.’ He took his left hand off the wheel, tapped his eyebrow. ‘Up here.’

We carried on at a slow crawl through a street that may have been the main thoroughfare and watched as a mix of white, black and Mexican-looking types walked on the pavement outside. Unlike those videos on *YA BOYY*, none of them were assaulting each other.

‘Isn’t that the freeway?’ asked Lexi, pointing right towards an adjacent sign.

‘The 97.’

‘But...didn’t we just get off that?’

‘You can follow it through, if you like, but this way’s more scenic. And the place we’re looking for is across the river over there.’

Nick seemed to know what he was doing, even if the methodology behind it was a mystery to all of us, so Lexi stopped asking questions and sat back with her head slumped on my shoulder.

I persisted with the scenery, quite impressed by the quaintness of the buildings, the amount of well-spaced trees, the women in dresses and hiking gear on the sidewalk...the way they moved and walked and swayed and bent forward to check their phones or brush something off their pants.

I focused on one in particular, a blonde Sadia type and...after a few generic walking shots, laughs, smiles...went quasi-dark, picturing the two of us in bed, me on top, pushing into her...but it was meaningless, sensationless...pale-room porn with one faceless prop poking a blank plastic mannequin.

‘Pretty little town,’ whispered Lexi into the Cyberman face on my t-shirt.

‘Yeah. Not bad.’

‘And about seven thousand Taco places.’

I laughed, shifting slightly as her breast pushed against my arm.

‘Wonder what’s for lunch...’

Nick’s voice cut in from the front, warning us that whispering was frowned upon in close collectives.

‘He can probably hear us anyway,’ Lexi said, moving back up into an upright position, ‘with his alien hearing powers.’

‘Not true, Lexitron.’

‘Told you.’

+++

The place that we were looking for, according to sudden local expert Nick Stahl, was fifty metres past a small park, in an industrial type building that, based on the abundance of semi-eroded fish advertising on the walls outside, used to be a fishery.

Or a fish packing plant.

Or a centre for abandoned fish.

Now it was something else entirely.

The sign outside said: The Museum Of Negativity, with follow-up posters plastered all over the door that threatened *One Month Only*. And to the left, something unheard of in adventurist land: a price list with a huge X through the middle.

‘Sadia stopped here... to see this?’ asked Juana, peeling off the corner of one of the posters.

‘That’s what the trace says.’

‘It’s a parody,’ I muttered, checking one of the leaflets pinned to the bottom of the sign.

‘Which part?’

‘There’s no entry charge... says *free for all* at the bottom here.’

‘Ah, not the concept then.’

‘No, that too. Everything, all of it. Just... feels like a joke of some kind.’

‘Well, comrade... won’t know until we try,’ concluded Nick, pushing open the main door with a counterfeit *whoosh* sound.

‘Looks like we’re the only ones going in,’ said Lexi, still propped up at the bottom of the steps, pulling at the sleeve of her *Kollontai Shoe* t-shirt.

‘You can wait outside, if you wish?’

Lexi rolled her sleeve all the way up then unraveled it again. Looked around at the three parked cars across the street and the extinct volcano in the distance. Took out her phone and scrolled through something, probably random Portuguese articles.

‘Well?’

‘Better not be *all* negativity,’ she said, keeping the phone in one hand as she walked up the steps to the door.

‘Would ninety-nine per cent be acceptable?’

‘Fifty.’

‘Ah, but then they’d have to change the name of the place. The Museum of Balance. Museum of Objectivity. Museum of...’

‘Fifty-one.’

‘...Fence Warming. Ha, much better.’

+++

The curator of the museum, an odd-looking guy with a long, red cravat and hair that may have been pasted on, greeted us beyond the door and - with a neon red *NO HOPE* sign on the wall flickering above his head - straight away launched into his introductory spiel.

The shorthand version: akin to old travelling carnival shows, the museum was a temporary thing in terms of placement, yet eternal in mission, sustained solely by the kindness of visitor donations. The titular concept had come from the curator himself, based on a vision he’d experienced while swimming in the lake outside his home town. Basically, a man in a very realistic tree costume [his words] had appeared above the water, floating effortlessly in mid-air, and told him how the world was far too chaotic and the only way to keep it from descending into dismal, murderous anarchy was to restrict people to small rural towns.

‘Like a prison?’ asked Lexi, tilting her head at a saxophone pinned to the wall, the words *Devil’s Tongue* stenciled in blood red ink on a plaque below.

The curator smiled, putting his hand on the hip of an Adonis statue with its dick cut off and making it wobble. ‘That is a different place, definitively.’

‘Similar principle...’

‘Only to the ignorant.’

Sensing danger, I moved up parallel to Lexi and gripped her hand. It seemed to do the trick as she gripped back, whispering, ‘just playing,’ into my shoulder.

We left the saxophone – or *Devil’s Tongue* – and continued along the narrow avenue of displays, some of them oddly mundane, like a bottle of Korean shampoo on a pedestal, and others overtly macabre, like...a dark figure hanging from a tree, blood dripping off in thick clumps...hopefully not a person.

‘Is all this stuff supposed to be negative?’ asked Juana, standing a little farther down the exhibition path, next to a diorama of a Mexican family, all grinning pleasantly, wearing t-shirts plastered with *SPEAK SPANISH*.

‘Inherently.’

‘Even this?’

The curator left the foam statue and joined her by the diorama. ‘It is a fact that seventy-eight per cent of all immigrants to this nation refuse to engage with the founding language.’

‘And what would that be?’

‘English, obviously. And those that do deign to engage tend to pollute it with phrases from their own tongue. Very negative. Hence the labelling.’

‘... ..’ replied Juana in Yaqui, the old sparkle of yellow forming in her pupils.

Whether or not the curator noticed was unclear as, even though Juana’s eyeballs were just to the left of him, he continued talking, focusing his attention mostly on Nick, who had walked ahead to a stage curtain at the end of the path and pulled it halfway across.

‘The use of negativity towards progress and expansion...science and technology and cultural mixing and all that palaver...is a device to delineate the parasitic undercurrents of our towns, our compact, little societies, and force people to appreciate what their ancestors strived hard to build for them.’

'You want people to stay in their towns?' asked Nick, coming back from the curtain.

'Not I, the tree demon. And yes, it is an ideological pursuit.'

'But you're a travelling museum?'

'A necessary chore, within the pursuit. See, this month, I'm talking to Bend and the people living here. Next month, it'll be somewhere else. After that, somewhere in Wyoming.'

'And after that, Atlanta?' asked Lexi, flicking at where the dick used to be on the Adonis statue. 'Harlem? Koreatown?'

The curator smiled, moving parallel to Nick and stroking the stage curtain, then slowly, with a poorly-acted flourish, drawing it open.

Curious as to how much weirder the place could get, but also a bit wary of the white supremacist undertones...or just tones, really...I followed him through. Hearing *you should eat this psycho* and *how about I just empty his head* behind me, I guessed Lexi and Juana were coming too.

Not sure what the latter thought about Sadia picking out this place. Not sure what I thought either. She was blonde...maybe a white supremacist too? Depressed at the size of Fresno, the melting pot...

I blinked, the stage curtain quite heavy as it swung back into my face.

No, she couldn't be...her poems. Too solipsistic.

More likely she just saw the sign and found it funny, assumed it was a showman's attempt at satire like we did. And then walked into this guy, with giant red tie and weird hair, and ludicrous tree demon story.

Leaving the stage curtain behind, I breathed out loud enough for Nick to hear, and took in the madness of the new room. Papier mâché planet models hanging down from the ceiling, pairs of green eyes against a space background on the walls, some kind of seating apparatus that I couldn't quite make out on the far side.

'As you can probably tell...this next part of the Museum deals with space travel, planet colonisation, and other things related to such. Not the wonder and awe

aspects that those lying TV serials try to promote, but the innate truth of the danger and evil inherent within the concept itself. Death by asteroids, death by suffocation, death by aliens, planets with no real atmosphere...' The curator stopped next to what I hoped was a plastic scythe, gripping its shaft. 'Did you know the devil himself resides on Jupiter?'

'Err...no,' I said, when no one else bothered to respond.

'It's true, they have conducted studies on the matter. That gigantic, mauve dot they keep seeing...that's him, the Devil's eyeball, watching us from afar.'

'Not entirely sure that's true...'

The curator pulled at the red cravat circling his neck, muttering *not entirely sure* back to himself. Then clapped his hands together and pointed left. 'It is an abstract concept, of course, which is why I've constructed a vehicle in which to experience it physically.'

'Ah, this must be where the budget went,' said Nick, laughing as he followed the curator over to the seats I'd caught sight of when entering; a row of four torn-out car seats taped together with wooden boards at the back. 'Can we sit on them?'

'That's the idea.'

'Any seat?'

The curator nodded, taking the seatbelt and strapping Nick in. 'There is some shock effect lighting, if you have epilepsy...'

'Ha, don't worry, comrade. My body is extremely durable.'

'And your friends?'

'Normal human levels. Two of them.'

'And the third?'

'Mexican.'

The curator nodded, for some reason glancing at me instead of Juana. 'Not taking a seat, young man?'

'In a second...'

‘It’s quite the experience, I assure you.’

I mumbled back a generic *yeah* and looked at the projection screen set out in front of the seats. My mind immediately shifted back to Juana’s video room. Similar dim lighting, screen size, vague sense of supernatural creep. The Yaqui addict clearly had the same impression as she came over and took the seat next to Nick, swatting the curator’s hand away when he tried to strap her in.

‘What exactly are we watching?’ Lexi asked, sitting down with an undisguised sigh.

‘Not watching, experiencing. It is a descent into the red eye of Jupiter, the door to the devil himself.’

‘To understand true negativity,’ said Nick, gesturing at the chair just past Lexi. ‘You’re holding us up, Keni cat.’

‘Not my name,’ I bit back, taking the final car seat, strapping in.

‘It’s safer if you’re safety-belted, young lady,’ advised the curator, looking at Juana and patting his waist.

‘... ..’ came back, this time in Spanish.

‘As you wish.’

The curator edged to the wall at the side, near the stage curtain, and pressed a switch on what must’ve been the menu pad.

‘Lunatic VR...’ muttered Lexi to my shoulder, as the room grew darker and a distant, hazy orb appeared in front of us.

‘Jupiter,’ said the curator, moving up to the side of the screen. ‘The devil’s door.’

The syllable on *door* seemed to reverberate around the room, as the orb drifted towards us and gradually evolved into the recognizable form of Jupiter...or we moved towards *it* and slowly, slowly, slowly, slowly devolved into luminous solar wind as the planet kept growing, sucking us into-...

‘This seat, it’s-...’ I stuttered, grabbing the seatbelt, trying to stop my body floating up and out, and Lexi was doing the same thing, Juana too, and when I looked

forward again, we were inside the atmosphere, unmoored, descending on a staggered drift towards the red spot and

seeing it was to activate it as

out of nothing, nowhere, it phased into a spiral hole, spun open with green streaks of light flashing like ammonia bolts nearby, not on the screen, but to the side of the car construct, in the actual space of the room and-

'My head feels a bit...' started Lexi then faded out as

a faint chanting noise seeped in from somewhere, the ceiling perhaps

punctured by sharp electronic cuts

and the curator, he was floating, somehow

in the air

in the void beside us, beyond us

spurts of green-flecked gas projecting outwards from his shoulders, his skull

and

when he rotated slowly to face us

it wasn't the red tie lunatic we'd been looking at two minutes earlier but a

middle-eastern man with a crescent moon cross tattooed on the neck

green maelstrom eyes

hands that were mist

legs that

'Nick...' I tried, panicked, dazed, but the words went nowhere

eaten by the background chants, the spirals of Jupiter's devil eye, the language

of the green-eyed thing as it split into four distinct copies

drifted closer to our seats

hands now claws

mouth now



A giant trout with eyeballs on the side of its dirty yellow face.

Disheveled grass.

The back of Juana's head.

Nad of her *Nadja* tattoo.

Greying sky grey track no bodies no cars.

Stone mattress, skinny trees.

Mild autumn breeze.

None of it made much sense until I felt my legs move, rolling in the idea that I did in fact have a body and there were insects making clicking sounds around me.

I stood up and quickly realized I'd been sitting with my back against a stone wall, with Lexi and Juana lined up on either side.

'Did we...?' started Lexi before ending it with a battle cry yawn.

'Is this the lava cave?' asked Juana, prodding a fist into the back of her neck.

It was a familiar name...lava cave...but I couldn't remember why. Last not-so-blurry image in my head was a hand sticking out of the car window, trying to catch those weird green streaks of light in the air outside.

'The sign says it is,' said Lexi, on her feet now, walking with a slight stagger across the grass. '*Lava Caves - Temporarily Closed.*'

‘We were going inside,’ muttered Juana, getting as far as her knees, face seemingly puzzled by her own line. ‘I remember...we were going inside and...’

‘...decided to take a nap?’ I finished, gesturing at the state of the terrain we’d just used as a mattress.

‘Si...that is strange...’

‘With rocks as pillows...all of us, at the same time. Yeah, very strange.’

‘What the hell’s he doing,’ muttered Lexi, drawing my attention to the forest on the left and getting an immediate, ‘huh?’

It was well-deserved. Our whimsical alien tour guide was standing in the middle of the road [or Heavenly Nature Trail according to the nearby sign; twenty dollars for free roam, forty-nine for VR tour]...holding one arm up in a crooked tree pose, while the rest of his body got struck over and over and over by low-level electric shocks.

That’s what it looked like anyway.

Thank the nebulous gods there was no one else around to see it.

‘Nick,’ I called out, following Lexi over to him but stopping a metre short in case his jerking movements evolved into alien-powered spasms with deceptively long reach.

He didn’t respond.

Or appear to even notice his name being called.

I could hear jagged whispering sounds that may’ve been attempts at communication [or a relapse to his native tongue] and, visually, there were these little whisps of faint lilac, kind of insulated in a darker lilac fog...shooting off his head like angry static.

The sane professor getting fried in *Resonator 2*.

Nick putting on a show.

Audition bizarro.

But for who? There was no one there.

The spasms continued, the purple phasing into tendrils, rhizomes, moans that sounded like genuine discomfort.

No...not a performance.

Too humiliating.

Maybe rage at taking an unexpected nap.

At the whims of the tyrant purple.

So severe, so deflating that it made him disintegrate.

Kuso...

Did that-

No...wait...there he was.

Cut and pasted to another patch of trail further left, whacking his head against the pricing board, elevating, floating

both arms peeled back

purple chaos still roiling

and then a shift

cut out and re-drawn, this time in the air above the *No Parking* sign, hovering without even the slightest claim that he was supposed to be up there.

A claim that was instantly redundant as he vanished for a third time appearing nowhere

until I looked higher up and saw a figure by the distant tree line

hanging rigid for half a second

then gone

deleted.

‘What...’

About eighteen different questions lined up in my brain, all of them functionally useless as Nick had just evaporated into etherwave nothingness and Lexi was stood tilted by the sign, looking just as blank as I probably did.

Did you know he could do that?

Was that flying?

Is that how he gets to Triton?

What was all that purple fog?

Alien oxygen?

I walked in a jagged curve over to Lexi, giving a shrug in advance, then just stood on the opposite side of the sign, vaguely looking at the trail, waiting for Nick to come back and say, ‘alien stretching, guys. Classical method.’

Lexi did the same thing, coupled with intermittent glances at the sky. Which was somehow even greyer now. Directed by the January version of Ken Loach. After looking at the Nature Trail pricing board.

I eventually got out a basic, ‘what happened?’ and she replied semi-lethargic with, ‘just vanished.’

‘Alien breakdown?’

‘Don’t know. Just...flying and then...gone.’

‘It did look weird.’

‘The purple vapour, his arms...’

‘Gone. There again. Gone. There again. Gone. There again.’

‘...skewed, the spasms.’

‘Bizarro colour too...like a Varo Jr filmn.’

‘Yeah. Bizarro. Fuck.’

There was nothing much else to add so we went back to gawping at the scenery. And then blurted out a jump cut, ‘jesus, *keuso*...’ as Juana pulled up between us, tattoo covered, face pure ghost auditor.

‘Did you see that?’ I asked, pointing vaguely at the sky.

‘Theatrics.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Frustration at taking a nap. Alien headache.’

‘All of them or-...’

‘Doesn’t matter. I have no desire to go inside an empty lava cave. Or hike that heavenly nature trail. Or wait around under those weird grey clouds.’

‘But...Nick, he just-...’

‘No more time wasting.’ The Mexican-Yaqui adjusted the strap on her bluebell dress, moving it about one hundredth of an inch closer to her neck, then looked off further down the trail. ‘The car...where is it?’

+++

The patch of grass outside the deserted Lava Caves held us captive, captivated, comatose in a tritanium ankle lock for another hour and a half before we eventually conceded that Nick wasn’t coming back.

At least not anytime soon.

And, as the sky was already turning dark, it would probably be wise to start walking down to the main road, or freeway, and see if we could find a bus back into Bend.

‘Portland would be ideal,’ said Juana, still rotating the kinks out of her neck from our impromptu nap.

‘Bend tonight, Portland tomorrow,’ Lexi drifted back, explaining that it was still a four or five hour drive to Portland and, on a bus, that could stretch even longer.

‘They do go pretty slow,’ I said, checking my wallet to make sure all the cards were there. Specifically the one with Cali-compatible credit on it. Lose that one and I’d be on the street, done for.

‘You sure there will be a hotel?’

‘In Bend?’

‘It isn’t that big a place.’

‘Don’t know...’

‘We’ll be okay.’ Lexi paused, forcing her head through the *Damijana Chu* hoodie she’d just snatched from me. ‘There were busy streets on the way in...relatively busy. Must be some hotels somewhere.’

Juana took out her phone and swiped for a minute, probably searching *Portland places to stay*, then, rubbing the back of her neck again, put it away and said, ‘okay, we try Bend.’

‘Then head to Portland tomorrow.’

‘Agreed.’

I checked back on the trail we’d just walked then up at the tree line for any incongruous shapes. ‘You think he’ll catch up to us?’

‘With his alien magic?’ asked Lexi, copying Juana and pressing knuckles into the back of her neck.

‘Yeah.’

‘Probably. At some point.’

‘And act as if nothing happened?’

‘Definitely.’

Juana muttered something in Yaqui, laughing at us.

‘What?’ I asked, genuinely perplexed.

‘It is hard to be around humans sometimes.’

+++

Bend was obviously larger than Juana thought as not only was there a fairly frequent bus running into town from the lava caves trail, but there were about five hotels lifting their skirts up [or trousers down] at us when we got off.

None were particularly appealing, but they existed.

‘Default choice if we can’t find anything else,’ I offered, getting a *sì, quizás* from Juana.

‘No need.’

‘What?’

‘Better premises have been found.’

Pointing right down a side street, Lexi followed directions on her phone to a smaller, and slightly cheaper, place, finally bringing us to a militia halt in front of a row of eight, identikit bungalows.

Unlike the hostel the night before, this one was themeless, had no pool, no VR shack, and no vending machine for late night, zero-sugar lemon juice. But neither Lexi or Juana really cared as they were tired and their heads felt tight and all they wanted to do was collapse on a relatively comfortable bed and fall asleep in spurts to some random horror mess on GENTE+.

‘We’re booking in then?’

‘Already done,’ replied Lexi, waving her phone at the side of my head.

‘You paid for it?’

‘Obviously.’

‘But-...’

‘We’ll sort out the compensation later.’

‘Tomorrow morning,’ edited Juana, putting both palms on either side of her neck, elbows out, and doing what sounded like a pterodactyl mating call.

‘Works for me.’

+++

Dinner was replica lamb kebabs and mayo-lettuce in bed, with Juana accepting Lexi’s offer of a cushion-mattress on the floor of our room.

‘To save cash,’ she whispered into my hair at the check-in desk.

‘We’re not that poor.’

‘Not yet.’

I strongly suspected there was another reason, but didn’t dwell on it as...honestly...it was a relief not to think, hey, should I try to touch her, initiate something?

If I don’t, will she think it’s weird?

And the very worst one: does she know I can't get it up anymore?

Those questions slipped back into black and white noise as all three of us lay on the bed, watching *Gremlins 2*, waiting for the door to open and a smirking Nick to stroll in, the *Bored Real Hard* jacket slung lax over one shoulder.

By the time we got to our second film, *The Editor*, Juana was already asleep - on the bed not the floor - curled up in her bluebell dress and impossible to budge.

Half an hour later, Lexi was in the same state.

Before that, they'd both complained of grogginess, possibly from the nap, or maybe the weird Negativity Museum we'd gone into earlier.

Both were possible, though it was odd that my head was okay. A bit hazy now and then, but not bad enough to make me grind knuckles into it and fall asleep at nine in the evening.

Or spasm like a loon and float off weirdly into the sky.

'We are all editors of our own realities,' came from the screen.

The words sounded like a command, provoking me into rolling off my tiny strip of bed and head over to the door. As soon as I moved, Juana extended her legs, colonizing the space I'd left behind.

Sneaky Yaqui devil...

Based on how hard it'd been to move her half an hour ago, plus Lexi's habit of nicking all the covers, it was unlikely I'd be sleeping on the bed tonight. Or sleeping much at all based on the thinness of those cushions.

Ah well, wasn't that tired anyway.

'And what if Claudio were to suddenly die? What then?'

I hovered by the bedside table, imagining the book-shaped rectangular space *Moon Prison* should've been filling, then internally shrieked *fucking Nick Stahl* as I thought about all our luggage still in the trunk of his car.

He couldn't just leave us here...with nothing.

Could he?

Unless he really was ill...injured in some way?

'Don't worry about that silly, little man. He can cut it as many times as you like, he's pathetic.'

I walked to the door and pulled the handle down slowly, letting out a snipped *keuso* when a beeping noise warned that the unlocking process was complete.

Luckily, Lexi and the recovering brain addict were in Vishnu sleep, not even an irritated moan as I stepped outside and another beep indicated the door was finally closed.

On the street out front there was little to no traffic.

No parked KIA stinger surveilling me or the bungalow.

I stretched out my arms and looked at the phone. The local news site had nothing on floating alien figures buffering in and out of observable reality, which was a relief. But it did have something about the Museum of Negativity. FAKE ART COMPLEX CHANNELS SATAN, KIDNAPS LOCAL KIDS. That was the headline. Below it, text that wasn't much different. A bearded handyman from Salem saying he'd done surveillance on the place for weeks, seen men in Satanic cloaks smoking cigarettes out back, then, somewhere in the middle of the story, claiming it wasn't a real exhibition centre at all, but the epicentre of a Muslim pedophile ring...thick accents, kids going in and not coming out. And, at the very end, final paragraph, the mayor of Bend saying no such museum existed and that the accuser was delusional, had a long history of making these sorts of outlandish claims.

Hang on, what? Didn't exist?

I read to the end, frowning at the claim that some unverified sightings of said museum had been made, but when the reporter visited the alleged site, all they found was an abandoned fishery.

Abandoned?

We were inside the thing that morning, with the weird red tie guy...the Jupiter show and the saxophone...the little Mexico diorama...

A car beeped its horn down the street, forcing my eyes up from the screen.

...the growing red dot. That wasn't...

The air collided with my skin, vibrant, sticky...green streaks within darting from molecule to molecule...fusing at hinge-points, threatening mist.

I closed my eyes, seeing the same green shade on the inside of my eyelids.

Absorbing it.

Was this screen flare?

Delayed recall?

The museum constructed itself within my subconscious, the four car seats in front of the projection screen, Jupiter growing larger, the darkness, the curator, the green flashes on all sides, a voice saying repeatedly, 'brain willing, brain whole,'...

I opened my eyes, riding out the haze transfer between ether-scape and street-realm, keeping the inside picture fixed in frame.

But the projection screen was different.

It wasn't Jupiter anymore, it was

her

the *Nightmare Castle* woman

half a face covered by long black hair

single eyeball glaring

lips producing

'brain willing, brain willing.'

A dog barked, erasing the image, pulling me back.

The green streaks were gone.

As was the voice.

I looked at my phone again, refreshing the article about the Museum of Negativity...only now the headline was different. *PILOT BUTTE VOLCANO SHOWS SIGNS OF RECOVERY.*

What?

I clicked back to the home page and skimmed the other headlines, then the smaller pieces, and finally typed in a direct search.

'Museum of Negativity Bend.'

Nothing.

Not even a basic announcement of its arrival.

I lowered the phone and stared off at the mountain silhouettes in the distance.

Was it a dream?

A lunatic's art pop-up?

Amateur VR?

There was one guy who could probably tell me, but he'd decided to vibrate weirdly and piss off into the sky.

Selfish alien bastard.

Didn't even leave *Moon Prison* behind.

Or our clothes.

A young-ish guy in a basketball shirt walked past, holding what I hoped was his girlfriend by the back of the neck, and then stopped at the bungalow two doors down.

I waited until they were inside then turned back to my own door.

Put the key-card to the electronic reader.

And stood there.

Didn't even tell us where he was going, a voice continued in my head. Didn't ask if we were okay. Didn't offer to take us with him. Didn't leave the car. Didn't-

+++

Head on the hardest of the cushions, Sci-Fi Queen hoodie as makeshift blanket, screen diagonal on the wall above, I stared left at Juana's mouth, open like an abandoned lava cave.

She wasn't snoring.

Neither was Lexi.

But it looked as though she should've been.

Like someone had pressed mute.

Real and not, I thought, moving from tooth to tooth.

Cannibal or not.

Yaqui or-

A grunting noise from the other side of the bed.

Lexi, my girlfriend.

Comrade.

Person I slept next to in novelty motels.

Person I sleep kind of near to in template motels.

Person I-

Flash of light on the screen, for a second it seemed green, but when I looked over it had morphed into a dull violet colour.

The cybermen docking at an industrial complex.

A space station.

Probably somewhere in Wales.

Bursting through a green-lit airlock, tin-foil suits with no dick outline, no smile.

'Utterly ruthless, total machine creatures,' said the Doctor.

Was this a good episode?

I had no idea.

Were the actors still alive?

The men inside those suits, the traitor, the extras with-

'Not the plague, commander...poison.'

Was this scene playing out somewhere, in a field next to the Museum of Negativity?

The Cybermen, the doctor...the other players...were they beyond all this?

Another grunt from the bed, this time Juana, mouth closing up.

Rotation towards Lexi.

Body on body on-

The screen pictures changed.

Regular humans shooting at humans in melt-face.

Cybermen and doctor off in the void.

Rhizomatic, asexual.

'When we reach the centre of Voga, we'll be fragmetised.'

I turned on my side, facing Lexi's scrunched-up jacket.

Fragmetised.

Dick broken into atoms.

Sequestered to a cold Welsh cave in the middle of-

'I sometimes wonder if your friend is right in the head.'

The screen went dark.

Characterless.

My hand pulled off the *Damijana Chu* hoodie and folded it into a pillow. Placed it on top of the cushion.

These aliens...Cybermen...melt-face guys...

Did any of them fuck?

Physically fuck?

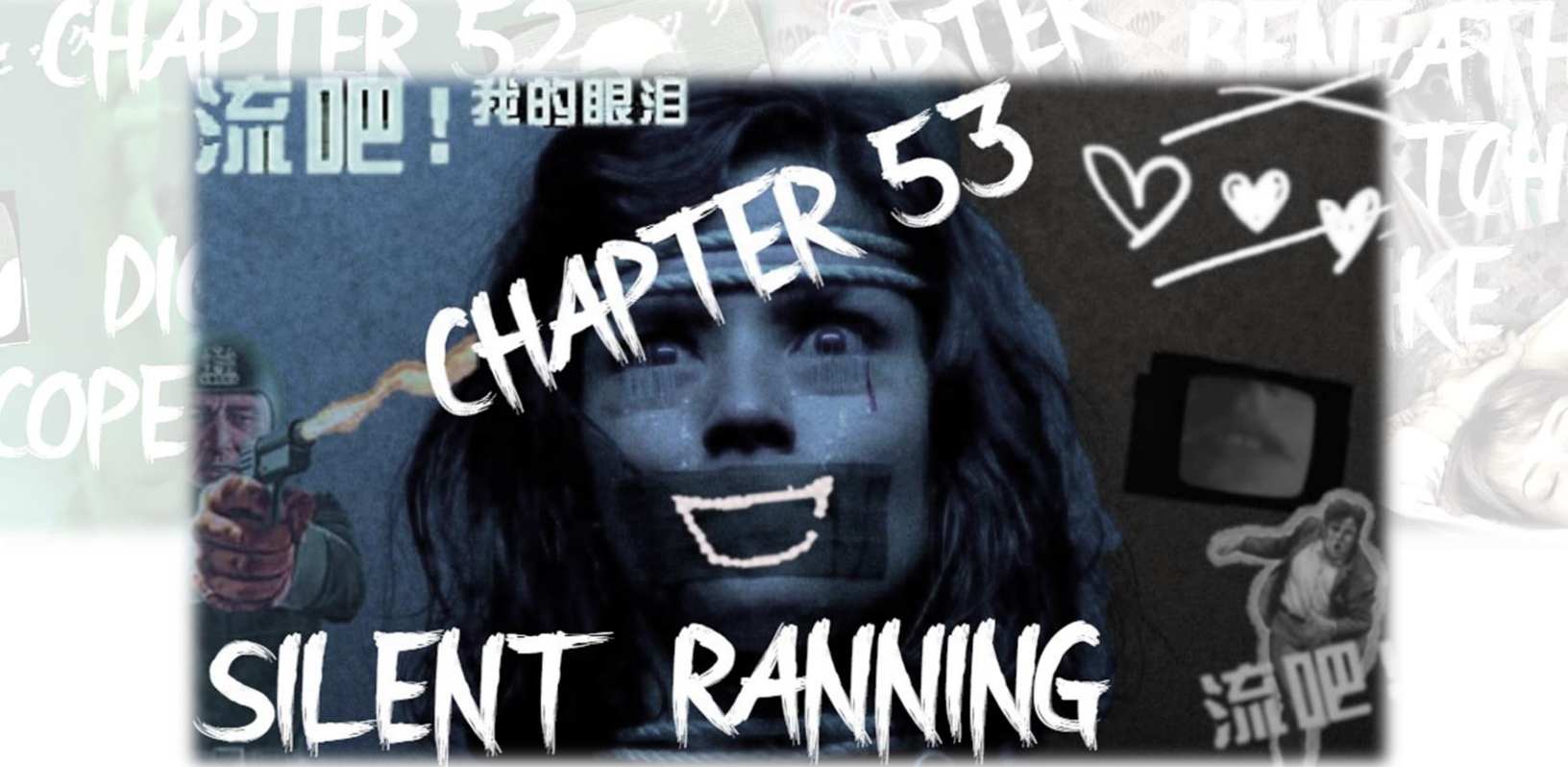
Was there a part of their brain that would-...that might consider it?

Dream of it?

Or was it all just kill...theatrics and kill...cut-price?

Didn't they struggle?

Wouldn't they at least try to-



The next morning was a little different from the previous one as Lexi was still in the room [instead of a swimming pool], had a Fordian monopoly on the duvet and didn't seem to care that Juana was snuggling up to her from behind.

Me?

At some point during the night, I'd made it back onto the bed, but now...I was on the brink of floor again, one foot planted like a Kubrick tripod on the carpet, the other tilting over the edge of the mattress...brain still trying to figure out which town we were in.

I looked opposite, at the TV propped up on the wall. It was frozen on the *GENTE+* menu screen, the highlighted box prodding me to watch *Void Galaxia*.

In terms of layout, it looked almost identikit to the last place we stayed at...the WinterMute hostel...but the cyberpunk décor was absent, and there was no narrative voice feeding me lines that may or may not have been from *Neuromancer*...which meant...

Bend?

The lava cave place?

I got off the bed and grabbed my phone, checking the internal map.

Yup, Bend.

The bungalow hostel, after the bus from the lava caves, where, for some reason that none of us could recall, we'd all decided to take an outdoor nap and Nick had...gone through some kind of fit...lost his mind...spasmed like a schizophrenic up into the clouds.

Kuso. That was real.

And he still hadn't returned. At least not to this room.

Putting on the only t-shirt I had left – a very creased *Don't Get Cyber, MAN* - I headed to the door then swerved right to the window when I remembered the beeping noise from the night before.

No car outside. No grinning alien prick standing next to it.

So he really had pissed off with all our luggage?

Kasu...

I turned back and looked at the snapshot on the bed. Lexi being sucked dry by a Mexican cannibal and sleeping through it. Or Juana covertly cupping Lexi's tits and nibbling on her shoulder blades. Both were man-centric and should've produced some reaction, but all I really felt was exhibit grade curiosity. Where exactly were Juana's hands? How did they get into that shape, with the duvet in such a skewed position?

Lexi moaned and rolled onto her back, forcing reflex activity.

I picked up the remote and pressed play on *Void Galaxia*, skipping past the childhood frames - the loss of Kazy, B's weird lake scheme - and straight to the wormhole appearing at Pluto Lagrange Point 2.

The humming noise of the ship woke Lexi, jabbed her body up into a sitting position. Juana stayed with both hands flat in the same place until Nakagami shouted that the wormhole was emitting blue orbs of light, and then she was up too.

'*Void Galaxia?*' asked Lexi, after a bit of swaying and eye massage.

'Wormhole scene.'

She looked around the room and the small amount of street she could make out through the tiny gap in the curtain.

‘Bend,’ I said, reading ahead.

‘Portland...’ replied Juana, half sliding, half crawling off the bed and picking up Lexi’s pants.

‘Dress is hanging in the bathroom,’ I said, raising a hand as a guardrail against my eyes.

‘Who?’

‘Your dress. The bluebell thing. Don’t worry, I didn’t wash it.’

She nodded, tossing the pants on the bed, then bounced off the side wall into the bathroom, apparently not giving a shit that she was completely naked.

Not even a pair of knickers.

‘Was she...’ started Lexi, watching Juana fade out, then glancing back at the empty space on the bed.

‘No idea.’

‘The whole night?’

I turned back to the screen, Nakagami jabbing the button for the airlock, yelling for compliance. ‘Yaqui culture, I guess.’

‘*Foda...*’

‘Yeah.’

+++

Without Nick around, breakfast was a much more sedate affair.

The bungalow complex offered free bread rolls, but they looked dry and enervating so we walked down a few streets until we found a little caffè called *Aveeno*.

Juana, of course, carried the baton of the *Portland, Portland, Portland* conversation, laying out a no frills plan to take a bus, get over there, buy some fresh clothes to

replace the ones we'd lost, and then conduct some very basic, very close surveillance of Sadia's new place.

'Do we know where she lives?' Lexi asked, taking a sip of her second cup of black coffee [which wasn't called Americano].

'Sí, I have it in my messages. Something Williams Avenue. North, I think.'

'And you believe she's still there?'

Juana took a bite of her pastry, then caught a falling drop of cream with her finger and ate that too.

'It wasn't that long ago,' I said, pulling back the local news site on my phone. 'Doubt she's moved. Hey, what the...'

'Bad news?' asked Lexi, pushing up to my side.

'It's different again. The museum thing...the place we saw.'

'Yesterday?'

I showed her my phone screen. 'See, now it says it's there for the entire month. But I checked last night and...first it said it was a Muslim pedophile ring...disputed...then it wasn't there at all, no article, no reference. Now it's got a promo piece.'

Lexi raised the cup vaguely to her lips, glancing at Juana...and reacted way too slow as some of the coffee spilt out over the rim.

'Don't you find that weird?'

'Maybe you searched wrong,' replied the Mexican, passing Lexi a tissue. 'A different site.'

'No, it was definitely there.'

'On the same site?'

'Or not there. Last night, I mean. Yeah, same site.'

'Hmm. *Falta de sueño...tal vez?*'

'Things were pretty blurry last night,' added Lexi, dabbing the *Ko* on the front of her *Kollontai Shoe* t-shirt, mumbling *foda* at the stain.

'Yeah, but...'

'I remember waking up at one point and...seeing like a load of green eyes by the window. For a minute straight. Really weird.'

'Green eyes?'

'But then I looked at the TV for a bit and...when I looked back they were gone. Probably immersion haze...or a relative of it...a loose one.'

I checked back on my phone, re-reading the same headline. 'I suppose.'

Nearby, an elderly guy walked past, with a little boy tugging on his hand, screaming, '*Pluto 2280, Pluto 2280, Pluto 2280, Pluto 2280.*'

'It was a peculiar place,' said Juana, finishing off the last bit of pastry then pulling her chair slightly closer to Lexi...and examining the faded coffee stain.

'The museum?'

'Sitting in that car seat, watching the Jupiter show...that racist curator and his 'devil's door, devil's door,' garbage. I'm glad we got out of there.'

'Another one of Nick's great ideas,' said Lexi, swatting Juana away. 'It's dry already. Stop it.'

'Still some residue...'

'Look at your own clothes.'

'*Necesita una limpieza adecuada...*'

Lexi turned side on to the Mexican, taking out her phone and pretending to read something on the screen.

'We can find a shop to clean it...'

'Great. *Obrigada.*'

'...in Portland.'

'Wonder where he is now,' I said, almost drowned out by a voice in a passing car yelling, '*in what fucking way?*'

'Alien Nick? Probably on one of these tables, watching us. Or in that manhole over there.'

'Wouldn't put it past him.'

‘Or having another fit out near Neptune. Fuck. *Foda*. Still weird how he just vanished like that. I mean, from a human perspective...for him, an alien...maybe not so weird. I don’t know. The asshole better get our stuff back to us though...wherever he is.’

‘Doubtful...’

‘Not that he really cares. Too mundane for the likes of him...returning stuff. Explaining things.’ Lexi took her cup, sucked up some coffee dregs. ‘Ah, maybe we should just buy some clothes here, my t-shirt’s starting to smell quite bad. What do you think, Juana?’

‘Portland.’

Lexi laughed out in staggered breeze, putting a hand on Juana’s bare arm. ‘One track lady.’

I latched my tongue onto the top teeth, killing what I was about to say, and instead examined the *AVEENO* logo on the coffee cup.

Nick not coming back?

Self-fragmentised?

The guy who’d found me in a basement in Fresno?

Nope.

Wouldn’t be that easy.

+++

Having nothing else to do in Bend, and with no firm methodology or scan-tech to track Nick, both Lexi and I handed the reins to Juana and allowed her to lead us like neutered boxer crabs over to the bus station.

She’d already bought three tickets online, apparently, so all we had to do was find the right depot then sit on a bench and play with our phones until the bus came.

‘Portuguese?’ suggested Lexi, waving a Brazilian travel vlog at me.

‘*Sim. Esta* okay.’

‘Then Japanese after.’

‘Err...’

We managed about seven minutes before Lexi finally admitted she couldn’t understand what they were saying, mostly cos there were no subtitles to hold our hands, and there was a *Big Brain Bakumin* video critting Tomomi Itō’s analysis of the hyperreal lurking in the recommended section, all of which was probably beyond us, that’s what I said to Lexi, and she agreed, but it was BBB so, ‘let’s watch it anyway.’

Turned out we were wrong, it was quite accessible, and the hyperreal was basically just a signifier for all the shit around us, the VR games, the online trauma, society in general, no fresh future dome for humanity to-...

The sound of screeching wheels punctured our theory bubble as a familiar car pulled up where the bus should’ve been and an Indian-looking woman in Nick’s *Bored Real Hard* jacket told us to stop fucking around and get in.

The three other people on the bench looked at us as we continued to sit there, gawping back at the KIA stinger.

‘Don’t give shock face, it’s me, Nick. Get in.’

Voice was different, tone a little softer, but the directness was spot on.

‘Are you frozen?’

And now the eyes were flaring up lilac...

‘Nick?’ I muttered, the *ck* almost non-existent.

‘Look...bus is permanently delayed. If that’s what you’re waiting for.’

‘*Que?*’

‘Road accident. Two dead, one paralysed for life.’ The eyes dimmed a little, as the Indian woman’s fingers...Nick’s fingers...flicked at the top of the steering wheel.

‘Best way to Portland’s by car anyway. This car.’

‘But...’

‘Come on, comrades, shift yourselves. Can’t sit on a bench forever.’

Throwing her extortionately priced carton of oat milk at the nearby bin [and missing], Juana got up and opened the passenger door, sliding in as if it were her dad picking her up from a regular Tuesday at school. That was it? She was just getting in?

Lexi paused the Itō video, said, ‘fuck the bus,’ and went for the back.

‘The fuck are you still sitting there for?’ barked the Indian woman, the purple in her eyes virulent again. ‘You should’ve been first in, Keni.’

‘No...’ I said, quite pathetically, as I followed Lexi onto the back seat and then, ‘sorry would be a start,’ to the back of our new driver’s head.

No response except a not-so-soft grunt.

Then the wheels screeched and we were off away from the bus depot, a solid forty kilometres over the speed limit.

+++

Any expectation of repentance or detailed explanation of where he’d been for the last sixteen hours was guillotined instantly as we were told to *stay silent until later*, then a terse follow up of, ‘dish out info when I feel like it, don’t push.’

‘We’re going to Portland, right?’ asked Juana, pulling out another carton of oat milk from god knows where.

‘Tomorrow.’

‘But you just said-...’

‘Silence, Juana.’

Her eyes reacted, the yellow so lucent that it reflected off the windscreen and forced me over to the side window. Then I realised it wasn’t actually her eyes, it was the sun hitting after our screech turn onto the 97. But still...they were pretty bright...and ultimately toothless.

Gradually accepting the current status quo...that had been thrown sack-like over our heads...Juana coasted into a transient state, sipping on the oat milk straw

and staring off at the mountains to the west, while Lexi and I discussed our situation in nominal whispers.

‘You think he’s having a mental breakdown?’

‘Alien glitch maybe.’

‘I don’t recognize the Indian woman...the new face...’

‘Real one’s probably in a bucket.’

‘...but she looks crazed.’

‘Or dead.’

‘What bucket?’

Some of her theories [and my own] made me flinch a bit, but I persevered through irritation and perhaps even rage, making the calculation in the more rational zone of my brain that Nick wouldn’t hurt us for just guessing things.

I was half right.

After Lexi’s [non-whispered] speculation that he’d been off in Portland the previous night, messing with homeless people or prostitutes like a little coward, the Indian woman hit the brakes, clambered awkwardly over to the back seat and gripped us both by the throats.

I closed my eyes to block out the lilac glare, and made a weak attempt to pull the lunatic’s other claw off Lexi...but her grip...no, her whole arm...was like a metal girder.

‘One hour. No words,’ she said calmly, digging the nails in as an exclamation mark then releasing us.

Sucking in as much car air as I could carry, I tried to say *fucking psycho* but nothing came out. Another try, without the *fucking*, still nothing. I looked left and saw Lexi touching her own throat, mouth open, emitting a silent monologue.

She’s taken our voices, I mouthed, prodding Lexi on the arm.

‘You can have them back in one hour,’ said the Indian woman, back in the driver’s seat, flicking something out of the window. ‘If you don’t annoy me.’

It was too ingrained in our reflexes not to respond with some kind of invective, and that's what Lexi and I did, even when giving up and folding our arms.

Yet every single time...no sound.

'Okay, the obvious questions first,' the Indian woman continued, looking at us through the windscreen mirror, eyes still a faint tint of purple. 'I have taken the form of an Indian-American woman. Ex-model working in AH-Bot sales. Gay as Juana here. Speaks standard Hindi as a second language. Basic insults in Tamil. Name is Reshmi. Call me this instead of Nick, it's easier. What else? Hmm. My previous abilities have not changed. Yesterday vanishing act was both controlled and necessary, despite what you think you saw. Sorry, comrades, do not anticipate an apology. That too is unnecessary. A distraction. I am tracking a dangerous foe. Focus is needed. You can talk freely at meal times. Do not try to change the agenda. Juana, that goes for you too. Everything will be fixed soon. Tomorrow, I will take you to Portland. I promise.'

Dangerous foe was the thing that stuck out, but I had to wait another fifty-odd minutes until I could follow up on it, and when I did, her new name was suddenly a complete blank.

'Excuse me...err...' I said, after several raspy attempts.

'Reshmi.'

'Reshmi. Right.'

'You have one question.'

'Okay...'

'Between all of you.'

I hacked up the phlegm lodged in my throat, glancing at Lexi. She still had her arms folded and was staring at the back of Nick's-...the back of Reshmi's head.

Didn't seem too interested in opening her mouth.

'Who is this dangerous foe you're tracking?'

'A coward,' Reshmi shot back.

'Do we know them?'

‘No follow ups.’ She looked right, and I copied. The sign coming up said *Sweet Home – 10km*. ‘We’ll be making a stop soon.’

‘Lunch?’ asked Juana.

‘Not yet.’

‘Snack?’

‘Maybe later. If you behave.’

+++

The stop in the tiny town of Sweet Home was brief and oddball.

First, we parked outside a desolate grey warehouse with a faded sign that said *Radiator Supply Housse*.

Then, with the three of us watching on from the car, a surprisingly tall, trim and quite pretty in a manic way Reshmi marked out a triangle in the dirt, stood in it with palms flat against her temples and...to give it sci-fi terms...flickered in and out of reality...while, at the same time, maintaining a sort of purple glimmer cloud at the elbows, shoulders, and base of the skull.

When the ritual was complete, she got back in the car and coughed out something in what I guessed was an alien language, then translated it with clear irritation into, ‘not here.’

‘The radiators?’ asked Lexi, deadpan.

‘... ..’ Reshmi jabbed green-painted fingernails into her forearm, not bothering to turn. ‘... ..’

‘Was that Hindi?’

‘Next stop, Lebanon.’

‘Where?’ I asked, squeezing Lexi’s hand and mouthing *don’t*.

‘Not the country.’

‘A town?’

‘Obviously.’

‘Sorry, I thought it might be a-...’

‘No more talking in the back seat zone.’

‘Err...’

‘That includes hesitation noises.’

I slouched seat-wards, moving a hand back to pull up the hood...then realizing I’d given my *Damijana Chu* blanket to Lexi again.

‘Will there be lunch in Lebanon not a country?’ asked Juana, pulling the side of her hair behind her ear.

‘Funny little Yaqui...’

‘*Si? No?*’

‘We’ll see.’

+++

A quick [silent] search on the phone told me that Lebanon was a small town about ten kilometres north-west of Sweet Home and that was about it.

Nothing much to see apart from a couple of [pay-to-play] small parks and a fifty metre long main street with a non-franchise VR.

Obviously, we skipped all that and stopped outside an abandoned clinic.

NOVA Health Urgent Care.

Reshmi rehashed the same performance from the radiator supply house with pretty much the same results.

Ethereal body buffering and *Not here.*

Presumably she meant the dangerous foe...the coward...who, according to Lexi, was probably a figment of Nick’s...no, Reshmi’s psychotic breakdown.

But when we cajoled Juana into asking her directly - who is the dangerous foe? – the Indian ex-model just tapped the steering wheel and said, ‘next stop, Stayton.’

‘And lunch?’

‘Later.’

+++

Around four in the afternoon, Reshmi finally got hungry herself and bought us all burgers from an artisan place called *Origi-Null*.

‘Five dollar flat rate for the burger, fifteen for four mandatory toppings, four dollar drink...equals fake independent cunt shit.’

‘You want us to chip in, give you some-...’

‘No.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘... ..’

+++

We drove a bit then stopped, eating the burgers in the car while Reshmi buffered jagged purple outside the deserted *Knife River Corporation*, which was apparently a concrete supplier. Or it had been before they’d let half the roof collapse and the red paint decay into pale orange.

‘Not here?’ guessed Lexi, mouth half full with heavily charred burger meat as Reshmi got back in the car.

‘They considered it...’

‘Who did?’

‘...for a long time.’

‘The coward?’ I asked, scrunching up my burger wrapper into the scruffiest of balls.

‘One more stop,’ she said, starting the engine, ‘then call it a day.’

+++

That *one more stop* was also in Stayton, an old rundown cinema on an empty street, and after that it was hostel time.

Lexi suggested a quick phone search for decent places, but Reshmi already had a place in mind, which just so happened to be the functional little grey block we were pulling up to.

‘Looks a bit bland,’ said Juana, sticking her face to the window.

‘No VR either,’ muttered Lexi.

‘I’ll check us in.’ Reshmi got out and closed the door...then re-opened it to let us know that we could find our own dinner.

‘You’re going out?’ I asked, but it was directly to the car door again.

+++

Reshmi may have been a new avatar, but she wasn’t a cheapskate.

There were several compact pods vacant at the hostel, without any amenities, basically just bunkbeds with vertical corpse standing space, but she shunned them all, literally tutting at the promo pics, and instead treated us to two deluxe suites, complete with large screen and GENTE+, plus access to the pool three blocks down.

Then took the car and pissed off again.

Did a lap of the car park.

Came back, wound down the driver’s side window and chucked the room keys on the concrete [almost in a puddle].

‘No scheming...’ she shouted, speeding off again.

+++

In the Elsinore Suite, Lexi and I stretched out on our king-sized bed, alternating between chicken wings and mushroom salad, avoiding the creepy monochrome paper

mill print on the wall, trying to decide if we should make a run for it or stick with Reshmi and hope she calmed down a bit.

‘If she does that mute throat thing again...’

‘Yup. Gone.’

‘But then if we sneak off, she might do worse.’

‘A lot worse.’

Near the end of a random episode of *Moons Of Guangdong* [that we were only half-watching], Juana came in and lay down between us, saying it was lonely in the other room.

‘She’s still not back?’

‘No.’

‘So weird.’

‘There’s only one bed too.’

I tried to do a whistling noise and was surprised when it actually worked. I’d never used to be able to do them, but now...

‘What the hell happened in that volcano?’ asked Lexi, stabbing a mushroom with her chopstick.

‘Lava caves...’ corrected Juana, eyes fixed on the TV screen.

‘Did we get attacked or something? Is that why we were napping?’

‘Only Nick knows,’ I answered, picking up a 99% eaten chicken wing and biting off a dust-sized piece of meat. ‘Sorry. Reshmi.’

‘Great. We’re at the whims of a lunatic alien...’

‘She’ll probably tell us eventually...’

‘...with a vicious mean streak.’

‘...when her mood swings back the good way.’

Juana coughed, cutting off Lexi’s next line. ‘This is *Colonies of Guangdong*.’

‘Moons.’

‘I like this serial. *Muy relajante*.’

‘Relatable?’

‘Lots of background players doing things. What do you call it? Versimulation? Versimu-...’

‘Sci-fi. Old.’ I glanced to the left of the screen, taking in the long dead mill workers trapped forever outside their shitty workplace. ‘Kind of old.’

+++

The next morning, someone yanked my legs halfway out of the bed and told me to stop lazing around, get in the shower.

‘Lexi...’

‘She’s already done. It’s your turn.’

I rubbed vaguely near my eyes and looked up.

Reshmi was standing there, impossibly tall, top half covered in what my hazed consciousness translated as the Colombian national team’s football jacket. Behind her, perched on the end of the bed, was a punk version of Lexi, hair dyed green, t-shirt skin tight and branded with a reverse cross.

‘What’s going on?’ I asked, pulling my legs back up onto the bed, squinting at a dirty white dress with strawberries and a blonde wig laid out on the chair nearby.

‘Come on, up, shower.’

‘Lexi...’

Reshmi leaned down and whipped the duvet clean off, letting it drop onto the carpet.

‘Shower, Keni cat. Now.’

‘Alright, I’m up...relax.’

‘And no daydreaming in there, we’re already losing time.’

I reeled off another *relax*, frowning as I walked past the dress, then mouthing *what the fuck* to Lexi before heading into the bathroom. When I came back out five minutes later, Reshmi was standing by the door, holding up both the dress and wig.

‘To go with your new football jacket?’ I tried, gesturing with my forehead at the Colombia badge on her chest.

‘Not for me.’

‘Juana?’

‘She has something else.’

‘Err...’

‘You’ve got one minute,’ Reshmi said, unfastening my towel and doing absolutely nothing as it dropped down onto the carpet.

Instinct split two ways, half dick cover with my right hand, half crouch to the floor. ‘What the fuck are you do-...’

‘The dress, the wig...put them on.’

‘No. What?’

‘Don’t be difficult, Keni, there really is no time for it.’

‘Difficult?’

‘Just wear the thing,’ said Lexi, pulling down a strand of her new green hair. ‘It’s not that big a deal.’

‘Are you hypnotised? I’m not wearing a fucking-...’

The words stopped and thoughts turned to fog as Reshmi pressed the tips of her fingers into my temples, whispering things I couldn’t understand but which sounded soothing, gentle, soft, authoritative...

I blinked long and slow several times, each one a piece of chopped duration, splice-cut to near future scene and

at some point

I was standing by the car window, looking at the reflection of myself in a long, white dress, and blonde wig, agreeing with Lexi that the strawberry pattern wasn’t as ugly as we initially thought.

‘Blonde hair suits you,’ said Juana, sitting in the front with square frame glasses and a light-green cardigan that made her look like a knitting instructor.

‘Gracias,’ I replied, riding out an abrupt stabbing pain in the back of my skull then opening the car door and sliding in next to Lexi and her satanic punk t-shirt.

‘Next stop, McMinnville,’ said Reshmi, guiding the stinger away from the hostel and out into a no traffic street.

+++

We drove through Salem and curved upwards to McMinnville, which was pretty much a continuation of the *small town in retrograde* series from the previous day.

Only this time, Reshmi got a little lost looking for her designated structure.

‘It should be here...’ she said, pointing at an empty strip of land to the left.

‘What’s it called?’ I asked, picking up the phone from my lap.

‘Keni, you’ll have to ask someone.’

‘Me?’

‘You’re the most approachable.’

‘Err...okay. If you don’t want to just search online.’

‘Here, try this guy.’ Reshmi pressed a button to bring down my window, gesturing with fringe lilac eyes for me to poke myself out.

‘Excuse me...’ I said, getting the elderly guy’s attention [and his dog’s too].

‘We’re looking for a place around here, it’s...’

‘Evergreen Lodge,’ whispered Reshmi, hand on my left thigh.

‘Some place called Evergreen Lodge. Do you know where it is?’

The elderly man stared at me, his whole face doing a performative slow motion lap around the outline of my blonde wig then dipping down to the strawberry dress.

‘Fruit,’ he muttered, finally, and kept walking.

‘Not a very enlightened human,’ commented Reshmi, pulling back out onto the street and beeping at the pensioner as she passed.

‘He seemed confused,’ I added, turning to Lexi.

‘Old people...’

‘Probably a bit weird to ask like that.’

‘Cute dog though. Completely undeserved for someone like him.’

‘Yeah, dog was okay.’

‘Maybe we should head to Portland,’ said Juana, pointing her face too far down and almost losing her glasses. ‘... ..’

‘Let’s try another passerby,’ continued Reshmi, scanning the pavement ahead.

‘Or we could just check on the phone,’ I offered, miming it out.

‘Here, this guy. He looks quite young.’

Before I could shoot out, *hey, someone else’s turn*, the car had pulled up parallel to the curb and rolled into a matching pace with the guy, who was walking in little slalom motions along the pavement. ‘Excuse me...’ said Reshmi, leaning out of the driver’s window.

‘Yeah?’

‘Much better. Keni, you’re up.’

‘Me again?’

‘It’s on your side.’

‘But you’re-...’

‘Last time, I promise.’

‘Serious?’

‘Come on, quickly, our young friend is waiting.’

‘*Kuso*. Better be the last time.’ I coughed, facing the guy with the slanted head outside, this time keeping my face inside the car. ‘Do you know where Evergreen Court is?’

‘Lodge,’ corrected Reshmi.

‘Sorry, Evergreen Lodge.’

The guy looked straight at the front of my dress and rubbed his thigh.

‘Is it near here?’

‘Evergreen...’

‘Yeah.’

'Fuck me...'

'Sorry?'

He stopped rubbing and came up to the window, poked his head right past me and asked if he could come with us. 'Down to San Diego, beaches, bongos, Bogdanovic left turns. I know where it is, *franza*, the whole blitz, every little nook, hook and cranny.'

'Are you high?'

'In times of rectitude, lady face, Stayton in your prime fat-...'

Reshmi told him to fuck off and pulled away, then gave out a long *kusoooo* as the guy kicked at the car door, screaming to the exhaust fumes that we weren't the real green feel anyway.

'We'll ask a woman next,' Reshmi announced, turning onto a new street with even fewer pedestrians.

'No need,' said Lexi, holding her phone forward through the seat gap.

'Evergreen Lodge. Right here.'

'You found it.'

'It's on the map.'

'Diligent girl.'

The car continued straight then turned left, and left again, with Reshmi making no attempt to look at Lexi's phone or ask if she was going the right way...almost as if the sneaky little rat had known all along.

+++

Evergreen Lodge was actually a wooden church, and abandoned, and that was pretty much all we could gauge as Reshmi acted out the same flickering routine she'd done in the other deserted places and then came back and declared, 'not here.'

Same thing in Longview.

And in Astoria.

Though apparently the last one was a long shot as it was too small to fit the Platonian ideal.

I assumed Reshmi was referring to population size, but when I tried to ask her, she just mumbled something about strategic amp-circles and then informed us all that the day had been a waste and the best thing to do was go straight to bed.

‘After dinner, right?’ I said, swatting Lexi away from my wig.

‘Yeah, I’m starving,’ she added, coming right back and twisting a new strand around her fingers.

‘Dinner...’ said Reshmi, as if it were a Sumerian puzzle.

‘Somewhere near that bridge,’ slurred Juana, the top of the green cardigan lodged in her mouth.

‘A proper restaurant too.’

‘Yeah, not a burger place.’

Reshmi repeated *bridge* and *restaurant* and then lapsed into vague mumblings of *it may have been here to deceive, if the initial line is accurate, which town fits and which one is a lost cause, negative all the time or just a patch...* until finally she coughed and said, ‘dinner. Not burgers.’

+++

As per the requests of Juana and Lexi, the place we ended up at was both a proper restaurant and close to the bridge. And a fishing equipment store. And a museum of the town sixty years ago. And a museum gift shop. And a dozen other things that they could charge for.

‘Permanent Neon Adventurism...’ Lexi pushed out under whistled breath, turning it into a fake gasp at the giant VR fish flickering by the reception chairs.

‘Doesn’t look much like a steakhouse.’

‘What?’

I pointed back at the door we'd just walked through. 'The sign outside...it said steakhouse.'

'Did it?'

'Thought it did. Could've been a different building.'

'Fish steak maybe?'

'Or that.'

Taking a table pushed in against the wall, three of us checked out the menu and the painting of old Astoria hanging above, while Reshmi put her hand in the air and warned that this was going to be quick.

'How quick?'

'I'll order for everyone.'

'What?'

'Then it's bedtime.'

The waitress came over and listened to Reshmi ask for four steaks, well-done, then made the error of looking at the rest of us and asking if that would be all.

'Four steaks,' repeated Reshmi, holding out the four menus.

'Okaaaaay. And to drink?'

'Water. Four glasses. Clean.'

'We have several special prices on the wine menu, if you'd like to-...'

'Finished.'

The waitress glanced at me, then Lexi and Juana, rubbed the top of her left ear, probably code for something like *has she kidnapped you*, then took the four menus and scuttled back to the counter.

'Fussy old wretch,' said Reshmi, monitoring the waitress and not even attempting to disguise it. 'She's complaining about me...'

'You were pretty rude,' I said, pushing the strap of my dress further up the shoulder.

'...calling me a bully. Rude? *Kuso*. I ordered the fucking meal. Write it down, go away. It's not hard.'

‘She was trying to be friendly,’ said Lexi, waving her hand at the invisible muon barrier around Reshmi’s face. ‘Maybe you shouldn’t stare so much. Look at the décor instead.’

‘If these steaks don’t come soon...’

I reached over and guided Lexi’s hand back down, using our traditional mime code to warn her off aggravating the lunatic alien.

But then, as things died down and the water arrived, I thought, why did I say that? Or think it? Reshmi wasn’t that bad. Just in a bad mood. It’s not like she’d-...

A wild streak of green steered me left, a grainy Herzog voice saying how everything was forced, everything was wrong, the dress was not as pretty as I thought it was, and the blonde wig could-...

‘Fucking capitalist hag.’

I blinked, catching the blurred shot of Reshmi holding up a bottle and pouring the water robotically onto the floor.

‘What happened?’

‘Eighteen dollars for water.’

I glanced at Lexi, who was already reaching for a tissue to soak up the mess. Then taking a handful when she saw how tiny they were.

‘Isn’t that normal here?’ I asked, helping her.

‘Very clearly said free, complimentary, not this bottled shit. Fucking leech...’

‘Okay, why don’t we just use the tissues to-...’

I bent down towards the carpet, just the right height to get a knee to the head and a curt, ‘leave it,’ echoing back.

‘What’s she doing?’ asked Lexi, rising up from her seat.

‘Don’t think we’re gonna make it to the steaks,’ said Juana, going the opposite way, pulling the cardigan up over her head.

Judging by the purple flaring up in Reshmi’s eyes, and the length of her strides, I feared that Juana was right...and literally breathed out in relief when the Indian model veered right and disappeared into the toilets instead.

‘Hope there’s no hags in there,’ muttered Lexi, tissues still gripped in hand.
‘Yeah.’

A minute later, the waitress appeared at our table with a [fish-motif] cloth and knelt down to wipe the carpet, telling us not to bother with the tissues, it was only water. I wanted to warn her to hurry up, get back to the counter and possibly clock off early before Reshmi came back, but she distracted us with random talk about different types of stains, how to get them off without expensive chemicals, and then the steaks turned up, and...thank the gods...she left along with the other waitress.

Still no sign of Reshmi though.

‘You think she’s really in the toilet?’ asked Lexi, picking up a fork and cutting off the fatty part of her steak.

‘Where else could she be?’

‘At the hostel,’ said Juana, sitting up straight again now that the food had arrived.

‘*Foda...*’ Lexi paused her cutting. ‘You two have money, right?’

I held up my hoodie and patted the pocket.

‘That means yes?’

‘It does.’

‘Thank fuck, I thought we were...’

‘Abandoned?’

‘...fucked. Yeah.’

Pushing her green fringe to the side, Lexi dug into the steak and I followed with mine, cutting it up into little square strips first. Juana watched us both, then grunted [in Yaqui] and sliced hers in half, sticking a fork into one of the chunks.

By the time we were half done, the waitress came back over, asked if everything was okay...dabbed a finger into my steak...then picked up the quarter-full bottle of water and smashed it on the edge of the table. Smiling at the result, she used her spare hand to pick up my glass and, without ceremony, threw it against the old Astoria painting nearby. Then did the exact same thing to Lexi’s and Juana’s.

‘Fuck this fucking water,’ she screamed, as the last one smashed into pieces and rained down dangerously close to Juana’s head.

I pushed back into the seat cushion, waiting for someone else to do something, to say something, but no one moved. Switching eyes left, I saw Lexi stuck in the same state, and Juana...sifting through the glass that had just landed.

‘Fuck this fucking food,’ was the next slogan, as the crazed server seized my plate and threw it most of the way across the restaurant, her aim skilled enough to hit another patron on the neck.

That kind of violent accuracy was clearly the last straw.

A stocky man in a fisherman slicker, either the manager or a cosplayer, rushed over and attempted to put an arm around the waitress’ shoulder, whispering not so quiet threats into her ear.

Psychologically, it was a bold move.

And then an amateurish one as the waitress used the broken half of the bottle still gripped in her left hand to stab him in the neck. Then the stomach. Then the chest...though the guy did somehow manage to lift up a forearm to block the worst of that one.

‘Fuck this fucking job,’ the waitress shouted, eyes glazed purple, pushing the bleeding slicker out of the way and marching over to the toilets, the bottle-dagger hanging loosely from her left hand.

The restaurant stayed painting-like for a few more seconds, then an invisible god flicked a switch in one of the patrons’ brains and a shriek rang out. Other switches followed. The customers nearest the toilets got up and scurried out, while the staff edged slowly towards that corridor, with kitchen knives and sieves trembling in their hands.

I looked at Lexi and Juana, giving the universal signal to leave – balloon eyes - but they just sat there, ever so slightly swaying their heads.

A fresh scream erupted, and a second, forcing me back round.

Kuso, it was Reshmi, coming out from the toilets corridor, a puzzled look on her face as staff rushed forward and yelled, 'where's the waitress, what's she doing in there?'

'Get off me, dregs,' she replied, pushing her way through and navigating back to our table, where she took one look at the wounded slicker guy on the floor, with five staff attempting to stop the blood loss, and said, without any fluctuation at all, 'crazy fucking witch.'

Then sat down and looked at the broken plates.

The shards of broken glass.

Our *Ubu Imperator* expressions.

'Fuck this fucking steakhouse,' she said, standing right back up again, brushing non-existent dust from her hands. 'We're leaving.'



The drive back to the hostel should've been eerily silent.

Would've been better if it had been eerily silent

But instead we had to listen to Reshmi explaining in an unsettlingly calm tone how devious it was to charge for bottled water like that and how the waitress had probably snapped because of it, having to push that kind of cunt scam nightly.

Then, walking up to our rooms, she diverted sharp to the next day, dealing with the wispy coward, and if we didn't get enough sleep, that coward would wisp the fuck off again and then we'd be nowhere, complete abject nothingness.

'Sleep,' I said back to the corridor carpet, stopping at the door to mine and Lexi's room, watching Juana give flare gun eyes as she followed Reshmi further along. 'Good idea.'

+++

When we were safely in the room with the door locked, I turned to Lexi [already a lump on the bed] and asked what she thought of the restaurant incident.

'Trying not to.'

'I mean, the way it happened, the suddenness...'

'We should sleep.'

'You think it was really the waitress?'

'Good night, Mark.'

She turned over and left me with my shitty hotel on the edge of an alien-funded abyss. The view told me it was Reshmi...Nick...the alien mesmerist, obviously not the waitress herself cos why would she, and the void below said, yeah, but it wasn't that traumatic, was it?

And even if it were, what were you gonna do?

Flee to Portland?

She'd catch you and then *you'd* be the waitress, only worse as it could be Lexi or Juana you end up stabbing with a broken water bottle.

Not that she would do that to you.

Cos she hasn't yet.

Would she?

+++

The atmosphere in the car the next morning was defiantly upbeat.

Juana had adapted to her librarian-style glasses.

Lexi was happy with the new *Lavinia Goddess of Death* t-shirt Reshmi had somehow found time to buy as a surprise gift.

And I honestly thought the new white dress with pale blue dots riding up my thighs was quite cute.

The blonde wig still felt a bit awkward, getting stuck to my back when I leaned against the seat, and then pulling down a strap whenever I leaned left or right or forward, or in any direction, really.

But it did let a lot of air in through the legs.

So not too bad.

As for our alien host, she was in a much brighter mood, letting us know that she'd focused hard all night and discovered that the dangerous coward foe could be hiding in an unorthodox spot, which is where we were heading to first.

'And then to Portland?' asked Juana, winding down the window and sticking her hand out into the breeze.

'If luck holds...'

'*Con suerte, dios...*'

'...which it will. Only so many rocks out there.'

+++

An hour later, the four of us stood like a rural-synth group, next to a large hexagonal hole in the dirt, on a huge animal-less ranch, in an area that the map referred to simply as Mist.

'In one of the lairs...perhaps six of them...' muttered Reshmi, picking up dirt and letting it drizzle through her fingers.

There was a lot more she was saying, but it was all in Hindi [or Hindi simulacrum] and pretty much incomprehensible.

As were the holes.

According to a half-search I'd done on my phone, and a slightly more efficient one from Lexi on her better-connected tech, there were a hundred and sixteen holes in total, all rigidly hexagonal, all dug by an occult nut thirty years earlier – he claimed that aliens from Zeta Reticuli had instructed him via the eyes of a *Nonchalant Grape* toy to do it – all largely pointless.

'But that strategy would be a Gupta derivative...' broke in more Hindi, 'in regent sense solus from the mind of the sensor in situ...'

Was Reshmi that same guy?

The more I listened, the more I started to believe it.

‘Don’t think Juana’s gonna last much longer,’ whispered Lexi, half hiding her face behind my shoulder.

‘She does look a bit pinched.’

‘You know, Portland’s only about half an hour from here. Driving at normal speed.’

‘That close?’

‘Go a bit faster and we could be there in twenty minutes. Yeah, very close, I checked on the map.’

‘Well...I guess we’ll be there soon.’

‘Will we?’

I patted the back of her hand, offering a *sim* that got lost on the passing wind.

‘No, no, no, no...explicit text, *anstaa*...supposed to be here,’ said Reshmi, throwing dirt into the hole and then jabbing the side of her head with her left palm.

‘The wispy coward?’ I asked, watching the dirt roll down a little deeper.

‘For ritualistic purposes.’

‘Where are they now?’

‘Portland,’ drawled Juana, her body tilting almost all the way down into the hexagonal hole.

‘No, no...impossible.’ Reshmi reached out and gripped the hem of the Yaqui’s cardigan, pulling her back from the micro-abyss. ‘Population, 1.2 million. Far too large.’

‘We could take a look, maybe-...’

‘Back in the car. Everyone.’

‘Err...’

‘No counters. The wind speed is all wrong here. Deceptive. Need to get back inside and reconfigure.’

‘Reconfigure what?’

‘None of you are moving.’

‘Seriously, what are we even-...’ Lexi started, then self-cut when Reshmi’s eyes flared lilac.

‘Car. Now.’

+++

A hostel bed or the back seat of the car...was there a difference?

Both were beginning to feel eternal.

Small town to smaller town to weird holes to desolate ground to the side of a deserted freeway, a stoic hawk on top of a sign for Portland, staring in through the back windows at us.

‘I’m getting a sense of...Verda...no, Verna...Vernonia,’ whispered Reshmi, both hands wrapped over her skull, pumping out own-brand, soothing mist violet.

‘You want us to search that?’ asked Lexi, taking out her phone.

‘A disused dog park. Brown grass.’

‘In Vernonia?’

I touched Lexi on the sleeve of her *Lavinia* t-shirt, then her wrist, bringing the phone back down to waist level.

‘Just trying to move this thing along,’ she protested, bringing it right back up again.

‘I know...’

‘Portland...’ mumbled Juana from the front, pointing out the passenger window at an AH-Bot board.

‘Yeah...we’ll get there. Relax.’

+++

Dog parks without dogs were still taxonomically dog parks, according to Lexi, cos the design remained inherent, whereas to me they were just a couple of lawns and trees with the occasional dried-up shit left behind.

To Juana, it was even simpler: they weren't Portland.

And to Reshmi it was [apparently] an outright offence to fair play as there was nothing, had been nothing and would be nothing in the future except the wreck of the tree she was gonna chop down with her bare fucking hand.

I managed to talk her out of it, but she was kicking loose stones, pebbles and arid turds all the way back to the car, and when Juana casually remarked, 'hey, why don't I go to Portland and you guys keep searching, then meet up later,' she finally snapped.

'This is for you, wretch...' Reshmi not just yelled but rumbled, spitting out purple vapour from her throat that instantly steamed up Juana's glasses.

'Yeah, the trip,' said Lexi, swishing her hand to clear the stray mist. 'For Juana's health, remember?'

'... ..'

'You said we were going to Portland.'

'... ..'

'Had to go there. Vital.'

'... ..'

'I don't understand what you're saying.'

Reshmi took a few long breaths, sucking back in the purple mist. 'Assault. Violation. That...thing...'

'What thing?'

'...is fucking laughing at us. Laughing at you. Hyena laugh. Cackling.'

I edged ever so slightly in front of Lexi, raising an arm in redundant defence. 'Maybe you could fill us in, help us understand better?'

'Waste of time.'

'The name of the dangerous foe at least?'

‘Pointless.’

‘I just want to see Sadia,’ said Juana, using a fingertip to wipe the condensation off her glasses.

It may have been the librarian-style cardigan, or the abrupt, heavy accent, but that changed things up a little. Or it curbed the barked responses anyway.

‘It’s not a terrible idea to just drop her in Portland,’ I suggested, keeping my tone soft. ‘We could pick her up later tonight. Wouldn’t take that long.’

‘Only a thirty minute drive...’ said Lexi, pointing ahead at the car.

‘And you wouldn’t have to hear the name Portland anymore.’

Another car pulled in off the main road, a dog poking its head out the window and barking in irritation when it saw us.

‘You really wish to see her?’ Reshmi asked, voice softened, right hand lowering itself slowly down onto Juana’s shoulder. ‘As she truly is?’

‘Si.’

‘Fine. Then I shall take you.’

‘Now?’

‘Because I’m a kind soul.’

+++

For thirty-five minutes things were relatively sedate.

Juana practiced various intro lines for when Sadia opened the door, Reshmi hummed a melody no one recognized, while Lexi and I felt that the situation was now lax enough to sit back and do some improv Portuguese.

Estou cansada. Estou ansioso. Estou preso.

But then I saw a sign drift by that said Mt Hood, checked the map on the phone and, despite my *ansioso* state, had to ask Reshmi why we were heading away from Portland instead of towards it.

‘We’re going to see Juana’s girlfriend.’

‘On Mt Hood?’

‘Close to it. Lake Trillium.’

‘That’s where she is?’ asked Juana, breaking away from her solo-roleplaying.

‘At this current moment, *sì*.’

+++

In spite of the impression given by its Venusian sounding name, Lake Trillium was neither toxic nor millions of miles away.

And it wasn’t an eyesore either.

‘Feels like we’re in the Canadian wilderness,’ Lexi said as we got out of the car and walked towards the map board, with the clear blue surface of the lake already visible in the near distance.

‘Not many people here...’ I replied, scanning the car park.

Before I could add *and no entry fees*, an RV nearby started up, moving back far enough to reveal a ticket booth by the main trail.

‘Adventurists...’

‘Here, there...everywhere.’

‘Like a fucking plague.’

‘One of these cars must be hers,’ said Juana, walking quickly up behind us and then overtaking by default as we stood stock still, trying to read the ticket booth price list.

‘One hour, three hours, half day, full day.’

‘With a free pair of VR goggles included,’ I finished, trying to copy Lexi and dig in my jacket pocket...then realizing my hand was on the waist of the blue dot dress, with the *Damijana Chu* hoodie dormant on the back seat of the car.

‘I guess we should go and pay.’

‘Yeah.’

‘You got your card on you?’

‘Back in the car.’

Lexi did a rotation of her wallet, then nodded. ‘Pay me back later.’

‘Mine’s in the car too,’ said Juana, fixing her glasses.

‘Serious?’

‘I didn’t know there would be an entrance fee. Wasn’t last time I was here.’

‘Fine, both of you then. One hour tickets.’

‘*Gracias.*’

Veering rightwards to the adventurist sham shack, Lexi looked back at the Indian ex-model locking up the car [in very slow motion] and muttered that she wasn’t paying for her too, then proceeded to buy four tickets for one hour each...and made a retired spy groan when four pairs of pea-green VR goggles were dumped down on the counter.

‘For single bear sighting,’ explained the grey-skinned woman camped inside the booth, ‘turn this dial to setting one. For multiple bear, turn to setting two.’

‘And setting three?’ asked Juana, tilting her head at the tech.

‘That one doesn’t work at the moment.’

‘Continuous bear?’

‘Used to be bear attack...for the younger visitors...but there were one too many cardiac arrests and-...’

‘*Foda...*are the bears that realistic?’

‘Of course, sourced from the latest documentaries. BIK Scenery prides itself on its authenticity.’

‘BIK...’ I muttered, matching it to the sign on the shack. ‘Why do I know that name?’

‘Isn’t it a razor?’

‘No...it’s-...’

‘Subsidiary of CarolKo,’ cut in Lexi, passing goggles to each of us, and throwing the last pair to an approaching Reshmi, who let them bounce off her arm as she

strolled past the ticket booth and over to a well-manicured grass trail leading into the trees.

‘You don’t want to see the bears?’ I shouted, walking over to the fallen goggles.

‘No lagging,’ shot right back, no head turn, no purple glare.

‘I guess not.’

After strapping the goggles to our heads [and wincing at both the tightness and the weird yellow filter on the screen], we quickly followed our alien leader, all of us probably assuming that she was using her purple radar to pin down Sadia’s position, and Juana directly asking if this park had a campsite and whether or not they’d be walking into Sadia with a large group of friends.

‘Relax, she’ll be happy to see you,’ said Lexi, snapping a twig off a tree and throwing it off into the undergrowth.

‘Maybe not me though,’ I said, following the twig down.

‘Yeah. Doubt she’ll even recognize you, to be honest.’

‘Huh? She’s seen my pic...’

‘Online.’

‘...which is more than she’s seen of you.’

‘And that was months ago. Wah...what?’

‘She *does* know me.’

‘I don’t give a shit if she thinks I’m Leila Dotsey.’

‘We traded e-mails. Who?’

‘Actually, she knows Lexi a little bit from the caffè,’ said Juana, attempting the start of a jogging motion [with goggles still on] and almost immediately tripping over a twisted root. ‘*Mierda*. Who put that there?’

‘Nature,’ I said, more than a bit caustic.

‘Maybe lift your goggles up...’ suggested Lexi, leaving her mouth open and staring off into the nearby canopy.

‘What is it?’

‘Bear.’

I turned, adjusting my goggles needlessly, and then slapping the side of them as the meandering bear about five metres ahead of us starting to flicker.

‘It’s glitching...’

‘*Kuso...*’

Taking the word as an insult, the bear turned bright green and split itself into three uneven pieces, its paws staying on the ground while its head and torso shot up into the trees above.

‘That explains the cardiac arrests.’

‘And the CarolKo connection.’

‘We’re lagging behind...’

‘What?’

‘Our tour guide. *Vamos.*’

Taking off the goggles, Juana resumed her jog and caught up to Reshmi, while Lexi and I hung back, watched the buffering bear for a bit – until it glitched out of existence – then took the goggles off and tried soaking up the natural scenery instead. As two people who didn’t have a stake in going to Portland, it was good to be somewhere that wasn’t a hostel or a car or a concrete supply depot. Or a dogless dog park. Or a double bed with heart cushions.

‘That dress and wig...they’re kinda starting to grow on me,’ said Lexi, after twenty minutes or so of walking [without glitching bears].

For a second, two seconds, I didn’t know what she meant...thought she’d put the VR goggles back on...and then I felt my own hand on the hem of the dress, hitching it up to stop it catching on passing thorns...

...and I laughed.

At the distance of it.

The segmentation.

Me watching my own body stroll around in a summertime dress, knowing on some level that it wasn't normal, that the purple had influenced it somehow, at some point...yet there it was...causing no discomfort at all. And confusion. Mild headache. Bearable.

The whole picture...thoughts...were unreal.

But also very real.

As real as Lexi's green hair and that *Lavinia Goddess of Death* t-shirt.

Green trees. Blue lake. Nice dress. Blonde wig. Flickering bears.

All associations were-...

'Over here,' shouted Reshmi, framed in a clearing up ahead with Juana, both of them waving at us.

'Can't see any tents,' I said, for some reason pulling the goggles back down.

'Or people.'

We hurried over, arriving just in time to see Reshmi strip off her Colombia Football jacket and dive into the lake, causing the very meekest of splash residue.

'What the hell's she doing?' was the question that no one could answer, but I asked it anyway.

'No fucking clue,' was Lexi's token response.

The three of us stood there, superfluous, staring at the fading ripples of the lake.

A minute passed and the alien hadn't resurfaced.

Two minutes and the yellowish-blue water started glitching zig zag cracks.

Two minutes and ten seconds, my goggles were off.

Three minutes and I wondered out loud if we should dive in and rescue her.

Four and a half minutes gone and I ripped off the wig, told Lexi to wait there, and was about to jump in to fuck knows what when bubbles burst up onto the surface, followed by a mop of dark hair and, a second later, Reshmi's glowing lilac eyes.

'*Kuso...*' I said, echoed by a bird screeching somewhere up in the canopy behind us.

‘How long can you hold your breath?’ asked Lexi, bending down and offering a hand. ‘You were down there for, like, ten minutes almost.’

Reshmi stared at us, or internally scanned us, it was hard to tell, then slowly raised her right arm up out of the water.

‘No, no...’ muttered Juana, as another patch of hair appeared.

Dark with streaks of blonde.

Trimmed short.

‘You wanted to see your Sadia,’ said Reshmi, lifting herself out of the water, wringing out some lake-drops from her *Pale Ondōa* t-shirt, then turning back and dragging first the head, then the shoulders, then the slightly blue, bloated body of a middle-aged white man.

‘Think I’m gonna be sick,’ mumbled Lexi, putting the goggles to her mouth.

‘Sadia?’ I asked, confused.

‘Esto no puede ser un cadáver real...’

‘In a sense,’ said Reshmi, ditching the dead body on the grassy shore and picking up her Colombia football jacket.

‘Who is this...person?’ asked Juana, prodding the corpse’s head with the tip of her flip flop. ‘Where’s Sadia?’

‘The shit poet? In Portland, of course...’

‘But...’

‘...putting this little mess behind her.’

‘No tiene sentido, you said she was-...’

‘Yeah, the more I think about it...or the thinking I did down there...it probably was the coward who did it. Altered her into-...to do this kind of thing, make her capable of it.’

‘What, coward? Who are you talking about?’

‘But then again, maybe not.’ Reshmi looked down at the corpse, putting one arm into her jacket sleeve...and stopped when she realised her t-shirt and pants were still soaking wet. Slurring alien nonsense, she clasped both hands together...and

without any kind of energy transference signifier...the clothes were dry again. And, a second after that, her jacket was on. 'Leave this for the animals. Or forest cops...'

'Cops?'

'...whichever turns up first.'

'But he's-...'

'No counters...from anyone. We're leaving.'

I closed up and looked at Lexi, who had her goggles pulled back down.

In solidarity, I did the same.

Checked on the yellowing corpse, still abject, then stared out at the glitching lake.

'Next stop, Salem.'

‘Wah...’

‘It was quite noticeable.’

‘...could be skin irritation, allergies. Or paint. Or soul erosion. Skin literally flaking off right in front of us.’

‘Soul?’

‘Probably not paint,’ I said, tucking one arm in to create more space. Not that it mattered. The bed was territory, and territory was fluid, swore Derrida, another philosopher I’d never quite got around to at unii.

Clearly a fan of this theory, Juana shifted her legs into a narrow triangle shape, forcing me out further to the edge of the bed. Mumbling *shameless fucking crone* in Japanese, I looked right at the bedside table and the chair tucked under it.

Moon Prison was there, face down.

Should I just move and read that? Get stuck on the same bit again, Sunita’s long journey through Uranus Immigration while high on *Kan-E*.

Or stay on the bed and push back?

Juana’s leg sensed my doubt and nudged my calf closer towards the edge.

I let it happen, waiting till she almost had me off then lifting my whole leg up and draping it full weight over her thigh.

If it were just the two of us, it may have been interpreted as a mimic-owl screech for frenzied sex, but as Lexi was there too, the Yaqui’s leg just gave up and played dead.

‘*Muy cómoda...*’ she muttered, picking at the face of the t-shirt spider demon.

On screen, Sato Mark 7 picked up the spanner and told the food replicator that this had been a long time coming.

The machine beeped in response, its three square eyes phasing dark blue.

Dark blue became lake blue became a glitching mass of yellow.

A specific patch of it, with a mop of bleached hair rising up through the ripples.

‘You really think the lake guy was...’ I started to say, then stopped, attempting to map out the rest of my line. *Killed by Sadia. Related to Sadia. Committed suicide after*

being rejected by Sadia. Tripped on a rock while fleeing from a flickering bear, fell in the lake, gave up.

None of them seemed great.

'I'm leaving at 6am,' said Juana abruptly, her voice so quiet that it was almost lost among the noise of the film's food replicator being beaten wildly by the Ondōaphobe.

Lexi pulled herself up onto one elbow, adjusted the sleeve of the *Kollontai Shoe* t-shirt. 'Leaving?'

'There is a bus round the corner, it goes close to Williams Avenue.'

'Yeah, but you're in the same room as Reshmi. How are you gonna...'

'I'm sleeping here.'

'...get out without-...here? We're right next door. It's the first place she'll look.'

'Don't think it's a good idea to leave,' I cut in, lifting my leg off the Yaqui's thigh. 'She might get mad.'

'And drop you in the lake.'

'Better to give her a day or two, see if she can find this foe she's looking for.'

Juana returned her leg to the middle of the bed and fiddled briefly with the pillow stuck half under her head. Then stared forward at the TV screen. Couldn't blame her, it was a good scene. The Ondōan diplomat giving a presentation on the merits of the other side of the wormhole, specifically the Ondōan star system...and slowly realizing that they were, in fact, talking to an array of Tier-3 holograms.

And the chaos after that, the diplomat storming out, telling the real humans observing from the adjacent room that there would be no more niceties, and certainly no invitations to the galaxy-famous Ondōan sex domes. Then shooting at one of the filter bots, mistaking its hissing sound for a weapon discharge. Then shooting their own hand as apology. Then ordering the other bots to...

I felt movement from Juana's leg. *Kuso*. It was pushing me out to the fringes again. This time I held firm, giving up not a single grain of territory.

‘Don’t care about consequences,’ Juana said, wiping the yellow that had re-emerged in patches around her mouth. ‘I need to see Sadia.’

Lexi patted the Spider demon face on her ex-boss’ t-shirt, looking over it towards me. I had a feeling she was gonna say *maybe we should detach too*, the same thing I’d thought after the waitress possession. For a brief second. Until the drift sensation filtered back in, and a vague circling of Portland suddenly became the most rational thing to do.

‘Still not a good idea,’ I said, turning back to the screen.

‘I need to.’

‘Too unpredictable...the Reshmi factor.’

‘... ..’

I slithered out a *yeah*, giving the remainder of my brain back to Tsukubashi’s Rabbit Hole. Not even a notable scene either. Just background character stuff. Sato Mark 7 flicking through a catalogue of Ondōan ships, telling his commanding officer that they were all impractical.

‘The Ondōans don’t think so.’

‘Poorly designed, awkward...’

‘Got them through the wormhole.’

‘Uncomfortable seats...’

‘Which is more than we’ve ever done.’

Sato’s resulting curse was muffled by the sound of the door opening and Reshmi’s voice drawling out, ‘Fucking fuckhead Woodburn.’

I stood up and instinctively reached for *Moon Prison*, no idea why, then sat back down on the edge of the bed when I saw a beaming smile on Reshmi’s face.

‘Fucking in a good way, comrades...the best of ways. Best of all possible ways. That’s right, I’ve located that tricky little fuck...wispy, runaway coward. Hiding in an Outlet Centre of all places.’

‘The foe?’ I asked, noting the robot-plateau expressions on my fellow hostages.

‘Now all I need to do is get some rest, drive over there early and strike like a fucking Kontolian. Before they get their-...nah, scratch that, they wouldn’t...not in an Outlet Centre. Far too quotidian.’

‘You have found the foe?’ I tried again, the others still comatose [or doing a pretty deep impression of it].

‘Wah, finally, after seventeen thousand axe-points. Yeah, found and pinned, Edgar Allen Foe face. About as Persian as Holo-witch’s ass crack. *Kuso*, three whole days. Very sloppy. Or acting it. Hmm, you guys better stay in the car, in case of rogue effects. Or you can come in if you like? It probably is safe, and you deserve to see the actual retribution part...the violence. I mean, they did do all those things to you too.’

‘Violence? Who are you-...?’

‘Not that you remember any of it. Or maybe a curated version, the green streaky bits. Just like Lexi’s hair. Who? That fucking djinn...cunt in the red tie...museum racist guy. Jesus, I know I’ve been closed-off, but there were enough clues...’

‘The Museum of Negativity guy?’ asked Lexi, rebooting.

‘...scattered about that you could’ve guessed. Yeah, that one. Negativity guy. Fucker played with all of us during that junky Jupiter shit. Got the jump on me...for about a minute...to a miniscule degree. But that was just a fluke, an anomaly and now...Woodburn, comrades. That scummy djinn...is not gonna know what’s hit him. Fucking give the wretch a real Jupiter kismet, old Neptune logistical, seven flared...’

I waited for Reshmi’s last [bizarro] words to die out, half-distracted by the Ondōan slope dance playing out on the screen, then asked the inevitable. ‘What exactly did he do? To us, I mean.’

‘*They*, not he.’

‘Err...’

‘Yeah, I know I said he, but now it’s they again. And the torture stuff...better if you don’t know about that kind of thing. Retribution is the blue key. Glorious void-scape revenge.’ Reshmi clapped her hands together, slowing at the last second to

muffle the sound. ‘Wah, Juana, you look like an actual brick wall. You’re not still angry about the lake thing? Granted, I probably shouldn’t have been that petty, but...you pushed me at a low moment and I told you not to do that. Remember? At the dog park? Portland, Portland, Portland, every five seconds...’

‘I’m sleeping here tonight,’ the Mexican replied, not taking her eyes off the screen.

‘*Que?*’

‘In this room. Not with you.’

Reshmi threaded fingers together, then unthreaded, possibly a self-debate mechanism. ‘Ah, I get it. Psycho-regress. No problem, comrade. Give me four of your Urf minutes.’

Before any of us could produce the inevitable *four minutes to do what?* she’d already passed through the door and gone, reducing the room to ‘TV sound only.’

‘Do you believe any of that?’ asked Lexi, getting off the bed and checking the lock on the door.

‘The djinn part?’

‘All the stuff about the museum, playing with our heads...’

‘It’s most likely true,’ said Juana, moving her legs into the space Lexi had vacated. ‘I know people who have fallen under the spell of a djinn.’

‘But...it can’t be. I remember leaving.’

‘Exactly. That’s how they can function without getting caught. The victim rarely remembers.’

‘Unless they’re an alien,’ I said, jumping back a bit as the door swung open again and Reshmi marched in, left hand gripped to the denim jacket of a Mexican-looking guy.

‘Who’s this?’ Lexi asked, stepping out of the way as the newcomer was pushed forward and prodded in.

‘An apology gift to my eternal Yaqui comrade, Juana. For making you see that pale sleaze Sadia poisoned and dumped in Lake Trillium, which was partially done in

self defence, to be fair...which is quite hard for me as her poetry really is terrible. And also for delaying our Portland trip until tomorrow afternoon. At the latest. Depending on levels of djinn subterfuge.'

'Apology gift...'I muttered, running through the usual series of confusion tics even though the Id level of my brain knew what was happening, as did the Fresno file in my short-term memory cortex, cos why else would the guy have slightly purple irises and no apparent control of his own limbs?

As usual the Id was right.

Reshmi led the Mexican guy on an invisible leash to the edge of the bed, then tapped him on the back of the skull. Either a genuine mechanism or the simulation of one, it prompted the poor wretch to drop onto the carpet and kind of let his head bob on the invisible air molecules close to Juana's mouth. Fortunately, perhaps due to the audience...and Lexi...the Yaqui ex-cannibal stuck to the *EX* part, tightening her lips, moving her claws away.

'Come on, comrade. Don't be coy.'

'No.'

'It's a gift.'

Juana shifted over to my side of the bed, refusing to even look at the guy with his skull lowered as a novelty sacrifice cup.

'Maybe a little background will help...'

'No...'

'This guy...this pervert here...rapes disabled teenage girls. Habitually. Goes out of his way to target them, specifically that group.'

'Jesus...' muttered Lexi, folding arms across her t-shirt.

'Takes pictures of the poor confused things during the act....then films himself masturbating on those pictures...makes them lick off the cum. Then rapes them again. From behind. With the picture of the first rape dangling in front of their faces.'

'Fuck, can you just...get him out of here?'

‘Yeah, get him out,’ I agreed, moving round the side of the bed, inserting myself between Lexi and the back of the possessed Mexican guy.

‘No, no...this one’s perfect. Truly undeserving of continuance.’

‘You kill him,’ came Juana’s voice, her back still turned.

‘What...and let his brain go bad?’

Lexi swerved around the side of me, putting a hand on Reshmi’s arm. ‘We’re supposed to be stopping her from doing this kind of shit...not forcing it.’

‘Ah, *all over the place* Lexi. I didn’t know your voice could be that soft.’

‘Look at her face. She doesn’t want to do it.’

‘Of course, she does. That’s why she can’t look over.’ Reshmi switched downwards, running her fingers through the Mexican’s curly hair. ‘But perhaps you’re right, I am being a little pushy. A little too *give to the needy* mode.’

A moaning sound came from below, the Mexican guy’s hands shakily coming together to form a begging pose.

‘Ah, this is too much. To be honest, the poor guy’s not even a rapist. Almost feel sorry for him myself. *Kuso*. Feels weird now. Maybe I’ll just put him back.’

Lexi backed off a bit as Reshmi lifted up the Mexican ~~wretch~~ angel by the arm and dragged him out of the room, shouting back from the corridor that, ‘he did have sex with a pretty dumb nineteen year old once.’

Beating Lexi to the door, I closed and chained it, then rushed to the window to see if the alien and her zombified pet would walk past outside.

‘Great, she’s happy *and* erratic now,’ Lexi said, coming close to the curtain.

‘Unpredictable too.’

There was no sign of them in the car park so we returned to the bed and arranged ourselves around Juana, who had made the silent decision to stay on my side. I thought about asking if she was okay, but the eyes were closed and her tongue was peeking out, trying to slide round to the yellow marks...then pulling back in reflex when they got too close.

‘Hopefully, she doesn’t come back for a...’

The door opened again, somehow, and Reshmi strolled in, Mexican-less.

‘...while.’

‘Four comrades, one room. On the eve of a great battle. Sorry...massacre. What are we watching?’

‘Don’t you need to get some rest?’ asked Lexi, one hand on Juana’s head, acting out vague massage.

‘Later. After I’ve cooled down a bit.’

Reshmi dropped down on the side next to me, putting a firm hand flat on my thigh, and focused on Sato Mark 7 fucking the Ondōan in the weapon’s locker.

‘What is this, erotic sci-fi?’

‘*Beyond the Rabbit Hole.*’

‘Ah...Tsukubashi...that old walnut. How far in are we?’

‘Don’t know.’

‘Keni?’

‘Middle somewhere,’ I said back, then turned off my brain and let the screen take me, the lights getting dimmer and dimmer as

the Ondōans finally got their way, returning through the wormhole with seven hundred human scouts, including reformed xenophobe Sato Mark 7, and

the sequel was tempting but unauthorized

not Tsukubashi and

besides

‘it’s almost twelve,’ said Reshmi, clicking off the screen with

green tendrils of wispieness

creating doors out of etch-o-sketch waiting

for devil dad to pop out

three different Sadias in odd-fitting *Tenebrae* t-shirts, visible nipples
threatening the tank
begging me to build a shed for her in Neo-Portland
as I tied postal string around the base of my dick
varnished and

seven-thirty
seven-fifty
news on the screen, weather report
eight eleven
eight-twenty three
and by then we were up
blonde wig, blue dot dress, green hair, glasses
being ushered into the car outside
Reshmi psyched, assertive, whimsical and

past a woman walking a dog, a man walking two dogs, a couple walking four
dogs, a dog walking solo, pensive, a broken down church, another church with a
STILL OPEN, DONATE sign, grassland by the freeway, Mid-Valley Clays and
Shooting School [Closed], *Sketch Burger*, *Hill Valley Piz̄za*, *Your Place*, *Great Bear Coffee*
and

the Outlet Centre was just off the freeway, not in a remote, uninhabited area
but near a bait shopp that wasn't open for business yet, and a few other detached
housses showing zero signs of early morning activity.

Reshmi parked about fifty metres down and turned off the engine, telling us that the moment of retribution wasn't theoretical anymore, it was brazenly upon us, or upon her alone as, due to innate psycho-kinetic limitations, we all had to stay in the car.

'How long will this...retribution...take?' asked Lexi, twisting round two strands of green hair.

'Just soak up the moment, appreciate it,' answered Reshmi, right hand clutching her left wrist. 'Picture our *L'Avenir*.'

It was both incongruous and French enough to put Lexi off asking anything else [my interpretation], and Juana was clearly looking at dream Portland through the windscreen, so it was left to me to also sit there and not ask any questions.

Didn't matter. Reshmi wouldn't have heard them anyway.

Lunatic alien was too busy putting down roots in the driver's seat, scrutinizing the windscreen, clutching her wrist, twisting it, injecting little wisps of lilac vapour into her alien version of veins, muttering things in a language not English or Japanese.

The Outlet Centre was right there.

She had psycho-kinetic, reality-altering abilities.

The djinn allegedly had no clue she was coming.

It was ten past ten already.

'What exactly is it that you're gonna do?' I asked finally, stretching out my question into its politest form.

'Yes,' Reshmi replied, pushing out a sharp breath, kicking open the door and stepping out.

'You sure they're in there?'

The door slammed shut, almost clipping my hand.

'No more questions, I guess.'

Leaning back into the seat, I watched through the window as the alien revenger rubbed the palm of her left hand, frantic, as if she were attempting to scrub off a permanent stain...maybe some of that green stuff Juana had mentioned that had

either vanished or been covered up at some point during the night...then stopping abruptly and punching her forearm instead.

'She seems nervous,' Lexi said, leaning across me to get a better look.

More like murderously excited, I thought. Which...in theory...could also be an expression of nervousness for an alien. Or something else entirely.

'You think she knows what she's doing?'

'*Sì, claro,*' said Juana from the front, her finger writing out something on the windscreen, probably a word beginning with P and ending in ortland.

'Based on what?'

'*Brechas de conocimiento.*'

'English?'

Juana started humming, switching full focus to her finger tracing.

'*Foda...*'

The driver's door was still open, so I got out my own side and closed it. The fresh air felt quite pleasant, as did the slight breeze coming in from the side. No idea which direction. North maybe. Good sign for the attacker? Or carrier of their scent? I leaned against the car and watched Reshmi stop at the Outlet Centre entrance, press both palms to her temple, swirl a bit of purple mist then continue in.

Lexi wound down the window and poked her head out.

Neither of us said anything.

We just watched and waited, jumping at the occasional car that drove past.

I had the vague sense that someone was going to crash through one of the Outlet Centre windows so that's where I put my focus. It was a drawn-out observation, windows not doing much most of the time.

But then they did do something...a kind of flickering, glitch effect.

A VR construct?

On this scale?

I glanced back, to the sides, up at the sky, half-expecting a Varo bear hybrid to drop down and absorb me into its madness.

No bears, no Varo.

My eyes went back to the Outlet Centre, running along each floor starting from the roof, scanning for signs of a secondary glitch.

Ah, there it was again...fourth floor...third floor...second.

What...

Not only the windows, but the entire building seemed to be one quarter of a shade off...phased out of this dimension...buffering with dark green patches...fading into a kind of ghost-like transparency, with trees visible behind, and then back to solid again until

about fifteen yards in front of us

both Reshmi and another figure jolted into existence

a Tsukubashi-esque jump cut

the figure with the face and torso of a middle eastern guy

limbs chaotic, narrow green swirl

the two of them locked in combat or struggle or

meshed together accidentally

it was impossible to tell and

then astronomically impossible to tell as the mass of Ernst surrealism that was Reshmi and her coward foe vanished

replaced by green mist streaks running short trips from one patch of air to another patch of air, no real markers, just frenetic green chaos while

in the background

a strip of wall plus window, from roof to ground, peeled itself off the Outlet Centre, held itself together in preternatural stasis for a few seconds...then slumped forward in a folding fashion onto the poorly-kept lawn.

I shifted back to Lexi, suddenly realizing that I was at least five steps from the car door. Her face looked unmoored, eyes compelling me back to the Outlet Centre.

‘Where did they go?’ I asked, not seeing any sign of Reshmi or the djinn.

Were they both dead?

Should we do something?

Pick up the strip of wall?

Leave?

I didn't have the guts to get in the driver's seat and start the engine, even though the keys were still in the ignition.

Lexi probably didn't either, not since the djinn assault.

That I still couldn't remember.

Did it even happen?

Even pulling the memory back now, it felt pretty clear that we'd watched a cheap VR shot of floating into the atmosphere of Jupiter, then got up and walked out to our car, driving out of Bend to the lava caves.

Was all this just a trick then?

Nick turning into Reshmi, pretending to chase down a dangerous foe who was actually a friend of his. Or himself. Rigging the wall of an Outlet Centre to peel itself off. Stabbing restaurant managers who charged high prices for water.

'Wah...' *gasped Lexi, bringing me back.*

She was pointing at the battle site and, when I turned to look, it was difficult to understand what she was saying *wah* about, but then I pulled back a bit, framed the complex as a whole and

Alien fucking sorcery

the left side wall, the strip that had peeled off...was back again.

As if it had never happened.

There was a mewling sound nearby, something like a dog but not quite. I took a step right and looked over the bonnet. A forty-ish woman was walking past, with a fox on a leash, shouting out basic sentences in...Russian? That's what it sounded like.

She crossed the panel of the Outlet Centre still life, completely uninterested in looking left, and continued on down the street.

With her pet fox.

Letting out an unhealthy amount of stored-up breath, I pivoted and walked back to the car window.

‘Is it over?’ asked Lexi, receding back inside.

I put one hand on the roof, the other on my neck. ‘She hasn’t come out...’

It was better than *don’t know*, but not by much.

Opening the door, I slid back in and resumed surveillance of the Outlet Centre, coaching myself makeshift tactics.

Wait an hour then go.

Wait an hour then check inside.

Wait two hours.

How long would Reshmi expect us to wait?

Two days?

A week?

Was Lexi running through the same options?

The sound of an engine broke in...our engine. Juana was in the driver’s seat, stretching out her right wrist in small circles.

‘We’re leaving?’ I asked, glancing at Lexi, who was already plugging in her seatbelt.

‘... ..’ came back in bullet Yaqui.

‘What about Reshmi?’

‘Not here.’

‘Yeah, but shouldn’t we...’

The car pulled out into the street, accelerating past the Outlet Centre and the Russian-speaking woman with the pet fox.

‘No more stops till Portland,’ said Juana, faint yellow eyes cropped within the windscreen mirror. ‘Agreed?’

No one answered.

Not me, not Lexi...definitely not Reshmi...who may not have even been on the same plane of reality anymore. Not the steering wheel. Not faint alien haze. Not

the spider demon on the new driver's t-shirt. Not the Outlet Centre. Not the possible alien grave.

Nothing. No one.



BREAKING: YU LONG YIU HEADING TO JOVLAN SYSTEM TO RECRUIT, HOPING TO DIAL DOWN USE OF RE-WIRED CORPSES IN FACTORIES

Suni didn't want to, but clearly did want to, some part of her, possibly a section of the brain that had an understanding with masochism cos she clicked on the link and read the whole article twice in seven minutes.

'That fucker.'

+

I paused, lowering *Moon Prison* to look up.

The underside of the bunk above had one wooden plank misaligned but that didn't matter as *Moon Prison* was seventeen pages from ending and only now setting up a possible revenge mission against the main antagonist.

Seventeen pages.

For Yu Long Yiu to turn up and Suni & Xaaa & Yu Fei & the Romanian tech guy to initiate their plan and assassinate him.

Or fail to assassinate him.

And die like Rodney, Sankara, Kelli Matrimonical, Tax-Bag...

There was noise on the bunk opposite, the intro sounds of a podcast on the Israeli guy's phone. *Kuso*, he'd found another one? After two hours straight of a man with throat issues screaming *Mossad Mossad* [and some other shit], we were about to get a secondary dose?

I picked up my phone and typed out a message to Lexi.

'Hebrew rant in 5, 4, 3, 2...'

Her phone beeped on the bunk above, and I saw that she'd read it...but no reply came. Not even the attempted typing of one.

Across the room, the podcast finished its ads and got underway. Surprisingly, it wasn't Hebrew this time, it was English, two guys with clipped American accents complaining about their houses in Israel being stolen by Palestinians. And how the rest of the world was just sitting back and letting it happen. Twelve houses between the two of them, all leased out and making money at the time of the theft.

'Fucking adventurers...'

Picking up *Moon Prison*, I tried to focus on the next paragraph.

Something about rigging the docking hatch and disabling the upper pylon graviton emitters.

But it wouldn't stick.

The Israelis were too loud.

Gods, if Nick were here...or Reshmi...

I stared at *won't rewire corpses anymore*, counting back the time elapsed since the disappearance. Twenty-six...no, twenty-seven hours...just over a day. They'd been gone for longer before, but never after fighting a djinn. This time...somehow...felt permanent.

Was it though?

Maybe Reshmi had got hurt and needed to go somewhere to recuperate?

My eyes went right to the wallpaper, reimagining two of the yellow sunflower prints as a pair of purple eyes, watching me struggle with the final pages of *Moon Prison*, muffling their laughter.

But then...she'd also have to listen to the right wing Israeli shit on the bunk opposite. No way she'd be able to tolerate that.

A squeaking from the bunk above, bare feet coming down the ladder rungs.

'Budge up a bit,' said Lexi, giving me about one tenth of a second to react before putting her knee down on my bunk.

'Finished your Slovene vid?' I asked, pushing against the wall.

'And the Portuguese one.'

'That was quick.'

'Was thinking about going out somewhere...away from the noise.'

'Not a bad idea.'

'Maybe dye my hair a normal colour. Or just integrate the green better. I don't know. Something.'

'You can borrow my wig if you want.'

Lexi twisted her head round and studied the blonde mess hanging off the back of the nearby chair. It looked a bit comical in this light, this context...as did the dress with bluebells on it...but part of me [a residual part] was still considering putting them back on.

'At least we don't have to buy new clothes anymore.'

'Nope.'

'Or visit weird holes dug in the middle of nowhere.'

'I kind of liked that one.'

'Or watch dead bodies get dredged up from picturesque lakes.'

The last line was said a bit too loud, the Israeli on the bunk opposite pausing his video and looking over, pretending to stare at something on the floor.

'Wonder how Juana's doing,' I said, picking up *Moon Prison* again and flicking randomly from middle to back.

'No idea.'

'It's been nearly three hours.'

'Yeah.'

Nothing more was added and Lexi's eyes seemed transfixed by the out of sync bed plank in the bunk above so I drifted back into the plot that couldn't possibly in any way be resolved in the next seventeen pages.

Three pages deep and Lexi returned from her trance, asking if I thought Reshmi would pop up on the street outside somewhere.

'The golden question...'

'Or on that bunk over there.'

I glanced left, focusing first on the empty, top bunk...then reading between the lines and switching to the Israeli.

'Wah...didn't think of that.'

'He is capable of changing form. She is capable...they are capable. Fuck, it should be *they*, right? Two of them, shape-shifting...'

'Maybe we should leave, see what happens?'

'Or *it* maybe. It is capable of...nah, but that sounds a bit impersonal...like they're a creature or something.'

'Just go with *she* and Reshmi. It's easier.'

'Suppose...'

'You wanna head out now?'

Lexi responded with one of her infamous battle yawns, offering a fairly ambiguous, 'yeah, don't know,' at the end of it.

'We can go and see that witch's hut you were talking about.'

She stretched out her arms, yawning again.

'Or something else?'

'Actually...'

Before she could get out the words *let's go and play Nightmare Castle*, the door beeped open and Juana walked in. The first look she gave was directed at the racket from the Israeli's bunk, a glint of yellow, followed by a switch leftwards to our bunk, specifically the small patch of space next to Lexi's feet, which she decided to collapse down on to.

‘Did you find her?’ asked Lexi, lifting her left leg up and dropping it on Juana’s lap.

‘... ..’

‘What?’

Juana looked down at Lexi’s foot, prodded a fingernail at it. ‘Poet. Topless guy. Living together.’

‘Okay...’

‘Wrong neighbourhood, witch. That’s what he said when he answered the door. That exact word. *Witch*.’

‘Err...that’s not very nice.’

‘*What are you looking at, witch? What do you want, witch?* Just glaring at me, hand on his hip...like there was a gun.’

‘And Sadia?’

‘*Maldito Nazi. Sì*, her too. Peeked out from behind him...that tight, little *Metroid X* t-shirt. Stared at me, this *Scanners* thing, my hair...dead eyes, blank as a doll...‘sorry, I don’t know who you are.’”

‘Huh?’

‘Not *know*...no idea. *Sorry, I have no idea who you are*. Same tone as that. Blank. Completely nonchalant.’

‘Maybe that djinn creature messed with her memory,’ I offered, keeping my voice low enough not to be detected by the nut on the bunk opposite.

Juana didn’t have the same caution as she just stared across at him, apparently losing all interest in continuing her narrative. Or any interest in sitting on my bunk as, a minute later, she had pushed herself vertical and disappeared up the ladder to the mattress looming above.

‘Guess she needs some space,’ whispered Lexi, sliding her legs onto the floor and sitting up. ‘Shall we go?’

‘Where?’

‘Outside. Anywhere.’

‘Witch’s hut?’

‘Sure. If you want.’

‘No, I mean...do *you* want to go there?’

‘Why not? Better than sulking around here.’ She bent down to the chair, picking up my *Damijana Chu*. ‘Hey, can I wear your hoodie?’

‘Outside?’

‘I’ll give it back tomorrow. Can I?’

‘Sure. If you want.’

‘*Obrigada.*’

+++

Turned out the witch’s hut wasn’t as close to our hostel as Lexi thought, and it was a mythical witch who’d lived in the hut, not a Lavinia type, and therefore no good. But the VR plaza she’d spotted just round the corner, *that* seemed to have reasonable prices, and *Nightmare Castle*, and not much of a queue outside, so why not go there, escape into fantasy-scape dynamics for a bit?

My mind was fairly blank, apart from an odd fixation on the imminent, abrupt ending of *Moon Prison*, as well as a general fugue state over the lack of blonde wig on my head and the general sense of unreality about the streets we were walking on, the idea that it was actually Portland and not some kind of well-funded simulac-

‘*Foda*, it’s all full,’ said Lexi, her voice a mix of irritation and disbelief.

I scanned the huge electronic *FULL* next to *Nightmare Castle*, gradually reintegrating my brain schematic into the lobby of the VR plaza and sliding out a monotone, ‘that’s weird.’

‘The most niche game in the history of VR.’

‘Must be more popular here.’

‘And a waiting time of two hours. *Foda*. What are we gonna do?’

‘*Moon Factory 7?*’

‘Can’t wait around two hours, it’s like an eternity. Not hungry enough to eat anything. Don’t wanna go back to the hostel with that fucking Israeli-...’ She stopped, my VR suggestion finally penetrating. ‘*Moon Factory*...isn’t that quite dense?’

I frowned, looking at the menu screen in front of us. ‘The story?’

‘I mean, the crowds...aren’t there like a million NPCs hassling you all the time?’

‘You can change that in the settings...’

‘What do they call it? Versimulism?’

‘...and there aren’t that many NPCs, not if you avoid the main promenade.

Yeah, verisimilitude. I think that’s how you pronounce it, I’m not sure...’

‘That’s it, verisimilitude. I think Jammer was the one who said it was annoying...the hassling thing...but if you can edit it out, okay. Maybe give it a try. If it’s still got space?’

Predicting her question, I swiped the menu and brought up *Moon Factory 7*.

‘Fourteen spots left. Thirty-five currently active. Not bad.’

‘Thirty-five...’

‘It’s a big base too. Probably won’t see most of those.’

Her fingers went to a green strip of hair, pulling on it as she examined the game art on the screen. Xen the reanimated human worker fiddling with a positronic scanner, flanked by Abbie the Ah-Bot in gypsy headscarf, herself flanked by a whole factory floor of comrades wretched-oppressed.

It wasn’t speaking to her heart, I could see that, but it was speaking to mine, and I’d already played *Nightmare Castle* a thousand and seven times, so now it was her turn to yield.

And if she couldn’t do that, one fucking time, then what was the point?

‘It’s up to you,’ I said, putting a bromine-coated gag on my Id. ‘No pressure.’

‘Don’t know. You sure it’s really not that packed?’

‘Very. Hundred and two per cent.’

I turned to a random poster on the wall, giving her a little more time, a little less covert coercion.

‘Okay,’ she said, finally, letting go of the hair strip.

+++

The settings may have been fixed to low density NPC count, but the game didn’t seem to care as the base galleria was teeming with life, alien, human, AH-Bot, Kontolian.

Lexi took it quite well initially, saying it wasn’t as crowded as she’d been dreading,

and she seemed to like my favourite bench

the one overlooking the Byrgius Crater

probably cos it wasn’t the hostel

or a shivery simulacrum of Portland

or a shrieking Israeli

and when I explained to her how I used to play this game a lot in Japan, as well as *Pluto 2270*, she pepped up enough to say, ‘let’s practice some Japanese together.’

Not really game-appropriate, and definitely not interesting for me but

we tried for a bit

[without eros or persuasion, no touching of skin, no stroking]

running through the planet names and the things on the base around us, like *wall, bench, view, metal floor, artificial gravity*

and then branched off into Juana talk, Lexi saying how at some point we’d have to detach, but that point was gonna be far off now as the poor Yaqui-Mexican demon looked depressed and you couldn’t just abandon a friend when they were that low, and

even though Juana had once sat down in a basement to dine on my brain

I concurred,

saying we could take her with us for a while, perhaps slowly make our way back down to Fresno and drop her off at the video caffè, if that’s where she wanted to go

or where we wanted to go
back to a cracked shell like Fresno
backwards in general
was it?

Lexi stared off at the replica mining factories of the Byrgius Crater, ditching the fifty-seven different thoughts I knew were colliding in her head on the lunar surface, trying to graft out a placeholder response that wasn't just, 'I don't know.'

Before the grafting process could be rendered complete, an NPC crouched down at the side of our bench and asked in a hushed voice if we were the ones looking for a top of the line graviton emitter.

'A what?' asked Lexi, looking to me.

'It's an in-game product. Very valuable. No, we're okay. Thank you.'

The NPC scratched his neck, a common programmed trait that indicated criminal tendencies, and told us it was on the market for one hour only, and if we were interested, we should meet him in Storage Bay Eight.

'No, we're not interested, thanks,' said Lexi, turning her back on him.

'Don't be fools...it's a graviton emitter, top of the line, no previous users. I'll give you thirty seconds to re-think.'

'Wah, I thought you said the plot wasn't this intrusive.'

'Just ignore him, he'll go away.'

'Err...don't think so, he's still staring at me. *Foda*. And his pupils-...'

The line was stalled by a giant chasm appearing in the NPC's head as he got shot from behind by base security, who were obviously not the official kind cos they were neither bumbling nor aggressive as they strolled over and coldly stated, 'this man is not a human but a fugitive Martokra in a skin suit.'

'The aliens from *Pluto 2270*?' asked Lexi, more to me than the masked guys with laser guns.

'Crossover characters. Same company.'

She nodded, watching the security attach RATCH-clips to the Martokra corpse, who still looked like a human male, and then saying *fuck* when, with an impressively realistic *and* abject digital effect, they dematerialized it.

‘It’s not usually this busy,’ I tried, but it was lost in the haze...the Jovian fog of guilt...some swirls saying, hey, it’s okay, she’s distant outside too...while others castigated me for pushing the potential love of my life into this type of silly, juvenile space station shit.

A losing battle, I thought, when the fog cleared and the Martokra corpse had finished decaying, cos at the core of it all

I didn’t really mind *Nightmare Castle*

or Fresno

or anywhere really as long as she was there next to me.

At least

that’s what the current part of me was saying.

I looked left, flinching when I realized how close her face was.

‘Hey...’

‘Can we patch out now?’ she asked, already reaching for her palm.

‘You don’t wanna try the-...’

‘I’m tired.’

‘Err...okay.’

‘Need some air outside.’

‘If that’s what you-...’

Her form and costume phased out in three slides, leaving me alone on the bench, the construct. For about four seconds...until a green-wigged language exchange girl came over and filled the empty space. Put a calculated hand on my thigh. Breathed into my neck.

‘Wanna go somewhere mute, hero, try some Japanese?’

I stared down at her body, plant-like.

Remembered other [Japanese] times, me and the same type behind a cargo crate, calling each other junkies, saying we could see it going in. The NPC Martokra disintegrating with a smile on its face. Indian skin. Purple ostracism eyes. The cover of *Moon Prison*. Lexi on the sand, in the lake.

Felt nothing.

Attached nothing.

Then blinked at the floor and pushed a finger to my palm, told myself it was Portland.

The Portland Effect.

An extension of the Lake Arrowhead Effect.

Nothing permanent.

+++

After walking around the surrounding block five times [and frowning at the local menu prices – fucking adventurers!], we returned to the VR plaza and patched in to the inevitable, *Nightmare Castle*.

Lavinia the Goddess of Death, the rack, talk to Satan room,

all of them performed their programmed function

yet Lexi insisted that it felt weird, Lavinia wasn't talking with the usual level of veiled threat, and the rack didn't have the same hardness as the one in Fresno, lacked the same cracks and grains, and, yeah, she knew objectively it was the same, that there wasn't an actual difference, but

that's what it felt like

and maybe it would be better if they just went back to the hostel and got some rest, then tackled things with a bit more distance tomorrow.

Her use of the word *distance* was odd,

distance from what?

Reshmi?

Fresno?

Things that had given some colour to our lives?

But I didn't dwell on it or say anything out loud, mostly cos I was busy covert-staring at Lavinia's blue tits, trying to guess where the nipples were, wondering if my dick had read Kant's *Lectures On Ethics* and decided, right, nothing sexual, from this point on. Not even the ghost of it.

+++

Back at the hostel

[still dinner-less]

yet another podcast was suffocating all the air in the room as we pushed open the door, full rabid Hebrew, and gasped at the two silhouettes on the Israeli guy's bunk listening to it.

One slouched on the edge of the mattress, the other propped up behind, almost in a sitting position.

At first, I thought it was the slouched one getting a massage, but then I saw the two yellow dots hovering and my brain went static.

'Jesus fucking-...' came out of Lexi, as she switched on the lights and the horror show became real.

'Not my fault,' said Juana, one claw still inside the man's skull, the other holding him steady by the shoulder. 'The radio thing...'

'Fucking psycho stupid fucking...'

'...he wouldn't turn it off.'

Lexi stormed forward, stretching out her hand to...do something, grab something, then stopped halfway and, with a feral burst of *oarrgagah*, forced her eyes down to the floor.

A few feet behind, I did almost nothing...continued to do almost nothing...except stare forward at the green strips in Lexi's hair, keep my finger stuck to the light switch, blur out the Israeli's cracked head frozen in the background.

The whole scene...it was too much, too Goya.

And yet, at the same time, oddly mundane.

'I asked him...so many times, but he wouldn't turn it off,' said Juana, audio only as I refused to shift my eyes right.

'We're in downtown fucking Portland,' hush-yelled Lexi, looking at the bunk again and straight away covering her mouth with my hoodie sleeve. A few retches and then a muffled correlation. 'People know he's here, Juana...in this room. With us. Fucking hell.'

'*No entiendes*. He tried to touch me...when I was sleeping.'

I moved over to Lexi, keeping eyes off the murder bunk, and told her we had to leave, quickly.

She muttered things in response, then dropped down on my bunk and breathed out a broken *fuck*.

'At some point,' I mumbled to myself and sat down next to her.

Moon Prison was facing cover-up by the pillow, able to help in no concrete way.

Fuck was pretty much it.

If anyone checked in, got that top bunk...we were done.

If we couldn't get rid of the body before morning...before the cleaners came in...we were done.

If we didn't delete all records of us ever staying here...

Fuck.

'*No tengas miedo vale*, I've covered him up now,' said Juana after a few minutes of silence and imagined DIY corpse burials.

I looked up and cough-laughed at the duvet with a giant blood patch forming on its surface. Then the Israeli's hand slipped out and I laughed again. Lexi elbowed me then caught sight of it and did the same.

It was hard not to. The entire set up looked ludicrous. As did the ingenuous expression on Juana's face, as if she'd just stamped on an irritating mosquito and that's why we were upset.

'What the hell are we gonna...'

There was a clicking noise, then the door opened.

'...do?' finished Lexi, adding *fuuuuuuuck* when she saw who was standing there.

'Not exactly the nativity scene,' said Reshmi, scanning both bunks without any attempt to close the door behind her.

Outside, a car drove past, providing a brief vapour-wave interlude.

'Fucking knew it,' continued Lexi, gripping my arm.

I stared at the green bruises all over her face and neck, running through the obvious questions:

Where have you been?

The djinn?

What's all that green shit on your skin?

Before finally settling on *close the door* and then *help*.

'You know, I was rehearsing a semi-apology for leaving you all alone like that...even though it wasn't entirely my fault...' She pushed the door back and forth a few times then finally let it close [when it started to beep], moving over to Juana's bunk. 'But now that I see this little landscape...'

'He tried to touch me,' protested Juana, pulling the duvet down half an inch further to try and cover the hanging hand.

'Wah...it's almost embarrassing...the amateurism. You didn't even lay down a plastic sheet. Or mesmerize him...by the look of that death mask. And in a hostel of all places...'

'No fue mi culpa, el lo provoco...'

'Provoked...'

'Si, he touched me.'

'With his scalp torn open?'

‘Que?’

‘Juana...’

‘Are you gonna help us or just stand there and gloat?’ asked Lexi, grabbing my blonde wig off the chair and awkwardly twirling it on her index finger.

Reshmi turned, the intensity of the novelty ceiling light showing dried blood scabs within the green patches on her face.

‘Please,’ I added, trying and failing to put even the tiniest bit of conviction into it.

‘Wah...that was very sincere. Both of you.’

‘Cos we don’t have anyone else...to fix this.’

‘No...you don’t.’

I flinched, and then once more as the blonde wig flew off Lexi’s finger into my cheek.

‘Will you help us or not?’

Reshmi bent down, picking up the blonde wig and placing it on her own head...stroked down past the ear...then smiled and handed it back to Lexi.

‘Yes or no?’

‘I can clear my own mess,’ interjected Juana, giving up on the duvet logistics and raising herself up. ‘Drop him in the same lake Sadia used. Drop her too. Callous little bitch.’

‘Ah, you found your little poet then.’

‘... ..’

‘And her new boyfriend, no doubt.’

Juana slurred some more Yaqui then moved towards the door. ‘I’m gonna find some bin bags.’

‘For what?’

‘Transportation. To the lake.’

‘No, no...silly demon girl.’ Reshmi put a hand out and guided Juana back to the bunk, sitting her down next to the still leaking corpse. ‘We’re way beyond lakes.’

‘It’s no problem. I’ve done it before, back in-...’

Juana stopped abruptly, her mouth still moving but no sounds coming out.

Ah, that old walnut.

‘What are you doing?’ I asked, just to test that I still had my own voice.

‘Relocation.’

‘You mean the body?’

Reshmi put a finger to her lips then used the other hand to eject purple mist directly onto Juana’s head...then her body...then around the corpse and the duvet too. Like a paranormal cut and paste, the mist grew denser, brighter in intensity, forming a vague outline shape of Juana and her victim before re-shading itself mustard yellow and erasing them from the room completely.

Alien fucking sorcery.

Yellow muon blob.

Impossible.

The bottom bunk, the sheets, everything except the duvet...was still right there, without any blood stains whatsoever.

‘Where did they go?’ Lexi asked, beating me to it by half a second. ‘Juana...the body...’

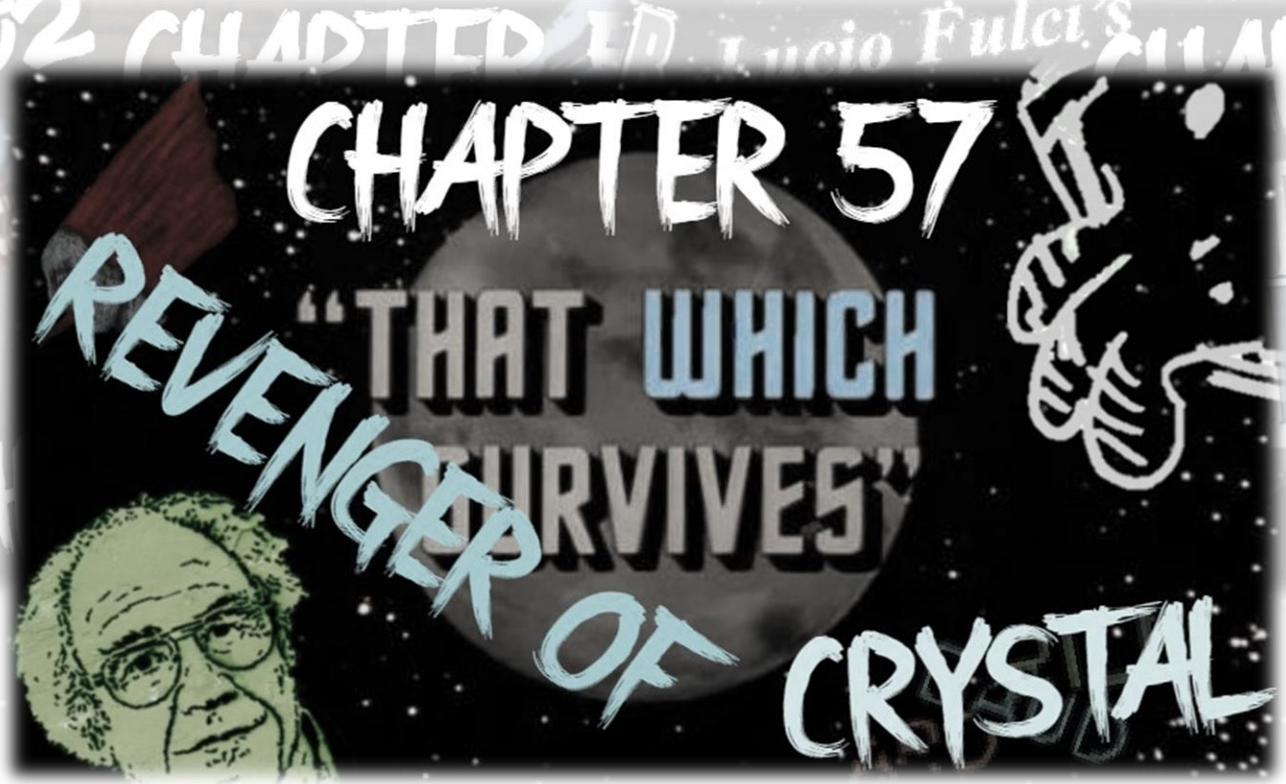
‘To a place where things can be disposed of without anyone coming to investigate.’

‘I don’t-...which place?’

‘My home, of course.’

‘But-...where? Lake Arrowhead?’

‘No, comrade. My real home. Way up there.’ Reshmi walked towards us both, the purple mist residue still leaking from her right hand. ‘Or way out there if you want to be pedantic. Care to see?’



No morgue at all

And the body wouldn't decay at -235 degrees

So why not magnetise the lump, dump it outside?

Essentially,

In essence

In the most basic terms possible

becoming lazy, stagnant, we all need to dig in and ski more

goes back upstairs and tries to have an Urdu lesson but ultimately it's too much noise and beyond the Urdu there was this flickering replicator light that

book was weird cos it was predictive

Someone read it, attached their own self to it, made the events within actualised, with a bit of help from the passive AH-bot, which is often the case

*and now people think it was written after the events
but actually
which people?
if you look at the dates and the*

*272nd drama about aliens lurking in the Oort Cloud, don't they have anything new-ish to
mush us with?*

Stalinists on Sedna.

Apart from that one.

My Beautiful Talking Laundromat.

Cheap pastiche.

May I Replicate Myself For You?

Shit. Generic. Like drinking from a plasma conduit.

I liked it.

Nice hat. Acrylic?

No.

*Taking into account delta v plus the current theories of Malken and Tai So, it is safe to
predict that the ship will be overwhelmed by radiation somewhere in the*

Lilac swirls parted, drifted to the side, and
the voices attached to faces
bodies, people
lounging around in what looked like a resort lobby, all blurred
shapes vague as ghouls
vague and
I blinked mechanically, particle by particle reducing the haze.

And when I put a hand...my hand...up to rub a head...my head, the voices on the couches ceased abruptly, each figure freezing within the frames of the action they were currently involved in.

Which seemed to be drinking from wide-rimmed wine glasses.

Two other voices, closer by - one of them a decent mimic of Reshmi's - continued as I pushed my arm left and collided with another body. Then turned and saw a crop of green hair. The blue cheek of *Lavinia Mistress of Death* on a t-shirt.

Lexitron.

Lexi.

Also coming to, judging by the arm spasm.

'Three is too many. Too much for you to control within your current state.'

'Four including you.'

'Glibness will not make you correct. You should be in the Steam Lab, recuperating from your struggle with the djinn.'

I stopped rubbing and gazed up.

Pinned down outlines, flesh.

Stabilised.

Reshmi...in Colombia football jacket...was leaning against a high table, an over-sized glass of pale blue liquid in one hand, pointing the knuckles of the other at an equally tall woman with pale yellow skin, who appeared to be glitching. Orbiting both these forms [hallucinations?] were eel-like wisps of purple vapour, some of which separated from the two woman and slithered over to the hotel guests in the background, still frozen with their drinks.

Beyond all of it, through a long strip of rectangular window, sat the looming blue sphere of Neptune, overlooking an ice field tinged with faint green spots - possibly my blurred eyesight - that had to be a VR rendering of either Pluto or Triton.

No...Neptune, that close...had to be Triton.

Or another moon I'd never heard of.

Or another solar system...

‘Ah, you’re awake,’ said Reshmi, raising her mega glass. ‘A little lethargic compared to Juana, but-...’

‘VR?’ I asked, faltering on the R.

‘... ..’

‘That blue thing,’ followed Lexi, index finger pressing hard into her palm.

‘Neptune?’

I looked down and realized I was doing the same thing.

‘Hmm, those responses are beyond embarrassing, as is the exit jabbing, but I’m a forgiving comrade so let’s just call it transition haze and move on.’ Reshmi dipped a finger in her blue drink, then pulled it back out and sucked on the residue. ‘I assume you have a vague memory of how you got here, the purple bubble, therefore we’ll skip that part, go straight into the intro. Welcome to Triton, my beautiful home, and yours too for the foreseeable future. As you’ve probably noticed by now, we’re embedded in the rockier part of the moon’s surface, with a containment field beyond human comprehension keeping us all snug and safe in the base here. What? The green bruises? Don’t worry about that, just some battle scars, they’ll clear up in a few more-...’

‘I’m not patching out,’ blurted Lexi, now digging each finger separately into her palm.

‘What?’

‘The tab, it’s not working.’

I watched her for a second, vaguely confused about the point of her action, then switched to Neptune in the background. Then the ice fields. Then the hotel lobby construct with people standing around that [I now recognized] were dressed in different period clothing. Mostly modern, but there was one guy in a green yukata, and a woman in some kind of flapper-era hat.

Weird just like amateur VR.

But with a level of detail that was...something beyond professional...close to object-reality even.

'Is this *Pluto 2280*?' I asked, focusing back on Reshmi, and then eking out a slightly pathetic, 'wah,' when the pale yellow woman next to her flickered out of existence...disintegrated, atomized...and reappeared seconds later on the other [creased] side of the couch...with a slight fizzing sound the only [outside of myself] proof that something scientifically insane had just happened.

'Readjustment,' she said to Reshmi, resting her hands on the back of the cushion to the left of me.

'I'm getting there, Assta.'

'On a needlessly circuitous path.'

Reshmi spat something out in non-English, placed her pseudo decanter down on the high table nearby, and bent down in front of her two new and very confused guests i.e. me and Lexi. 'This is a little disappointing, after all we've been through...hey, stop doing that.'

She grabbed Lexi's hand and covered the palm. 'This is obviously not your shitty VR scape. Look at Neptune out there, the detail of it, the nitrogen plumes.'

'No, it's-...we can't actually-...how did we-...' Lexi started, eyes floating off towards the blue planet, and the end of the line going with her.

'Okay, don't gawp, let's just-...' Reshmi clicked her fingers in front of Lexi's face then moved level with our own eyes, putting one set of three fingertips on both outside temples. 'Let's just get the basics out of the way first.'

'It's not too late to send them back,' said the pale yellow woman from her intimidation point behind the couch.

'Or turn you off.'

'Visit them from time to time, if you wish. Keep the other creature as a pet until she's reoriented. If you must.'

'Bit of quiet, please, Assta.'

The back of the couch lightened suddenly and the pale yellow woman apparently called Assta returned to a lieutenant position behind Reshmi.

‘Okay, little ones...sorry, comrades.’

I sat still, as did Lexi, my limbs dormant yet alert, waiting for our old friend purple to sensualise things.

‘We are on Triton. My base of operations, as humans might call it. Military humans. The figures around you are holograms, quite basic. Capable of moderate conversation and corridor intrigue. Irritating if you spend more than four hours with them. Assta...is a little different. They appear holographic yet are in fact the AI caretaker of this whole complex. Not a hard concept to come to terms with. You have similar characters in some of your dystopian media, albeit a little more childish. Yes, it’s making sense now, isn’t it? No more jabbing at your palms and half-finished sentences. What else? Juana is in detox. Or in proper terms, the Steam Lab. Not the same as a human steam room. You’ll see that later. Though she’ll probably have been moved to a different area by then. Externals? Neptune is lingering up there, out there, as it usually does, along with the nitrogen ice fields. The base gets the view of that pretty green tint as we’re near the equator. Elsewhere, it’s mostly grey...blue-ish grey if you have retina deficiencies. In terms of suit-less exploration, you can go out a few hundred metres, as far as the containment field perimeter, but after that things become death-real. Even for me. Though obviously my form would perish at a much slower rate than either of yours due to a more adaptable physiology. Don’t look hurt, it’s just nature. No one’s fault. Okay? Right. There it is. All the foundational stuff. You may now slouch back and do your very best dazed panda impressions...same as after Kip’s house...wah, that was a fun time, wasn’t it? The pool party, Juana’s antics. I’d almost forgotten. A very fun time.’

Her dark fingers left my temple and conjured up a wine glass out of nothing, holding it out towards me. I took it and curved back, swaying my whole body to a comical degree as I followed the pale blue currents moving within.

‘Is this alien?’ asked Lexi, studying the same blue liquid in her own glass.

'Blueberry and vodka.'

'Serious?'

'Extremely. Anything else would be fatal. This, however, is the opposite...it relaxes you, soothes...makes things a little more manageable.'

Lexi sniffed around the rim then looked at me, whispering, 'you first.'

I shrugged, oddly confident, and took a sip.

Couldn't taste the blueberry or the vodka...but it wasn't bad.

Lexi copied, acted facially pensive for a few seconds, then drank a whole lot more, stopping just short of making a comical *abbb* sound.

'This whole place is yours?' I asked, gesturing with my glass at the lobby situated around us.

'Functionally.'

'You mean you're renting?'

'Please don't apply human concepts to my home.'

'Err...'

'And seriously...*dude*...no more *err* sounds. It's becoming a very annoying habit.'

I thought about modifying to *arr*, or parroting *dude* back at her, but decided it was probably best to just shut up and drink my blue juice. Even though *err* was an understandable response to what she'd just said. The queen of applying human concepts to everything. And king before that, when it was the Nick era.

'Where are all the others?' asked Lexi, glass already on the brink of being empty.
'The ones like you.'

'Sabbatical,' replied Reshmi drily.

'On a different planet?'

'You didn't tell them?' asked Assta, appearing next to Lexi and refilling her glass with a stream of blue.

Reshmi finished off her own drink, from the decanter-sized glass, and then tossed it casually over to Assta. Phasing herself quickly out of existence, the glass fell

right through the space Assta had been occupying and, a second later, vanished into the dark red carpet lining the floor.

Or part of the floor. Based on what I could see of the rest of the lobby, it was more like a series of rugs, most of them placed beside the couches.

‘As you’re more relaxed now, why don’t we take you for a little tour outside,’ said Reshmi, putting two fingers up at Assta, who had rematerialized next to one of the more basic holograms, a tanned guy in a fedora.

‘Outside?’ I asked, vaguely remembering the foundational intro talk a few minutes earlier.

‘Stretch those long legs a bit. Get the two of you some sweet Triton air.’

‘Air?’

‘Filtered through the base containment shield, obviously.’

‘Shield?’

‘Lexitron...please...’

‘Lexi...’

‘...at least try to remember the things I just explained to you...’

‘...not Lexitron.’

‘...okay?’

‘And you didn’t say anything about air filters in the shield.’

‘That is not a nod.’

‘Far as I know...’

‘Still not a nod.’

‘...did she?’

Lexi had eyes trained on me, so I shook my head, keeping my real thought – *use your imagination* – cloaked.

‘Lexitron...comrade...in cases of the implicit, fill in the gaps. Or in peasant terms...’ Reshmi put a nail on Lexi’s knee, circling the bone. ‘...use your brain.’

‘It’s Lexi,’ she replied, shifting her leg away.

‘... ..’

‘Not that hard to remember.’

+++

After finishing our blueberry vodkas,
and nodding through a pretty weird, alt-historical defence of the name *Lexitron*
[to which Lexi responded with, ‘okay, Reshmitron,’]

we left the lobby that, according to Reshmi, had been maintained that exact way
for seventy-eight years as a type of Trekkian comfort blanket to her previous human
guests, who we were forbidden from asking about for personal reasons,

headed through what our guide called a KAV-Tunnel, with bright sun-like icons
accompanying us along the walls, each one growing and deflating on loop,

beyond the [apparently] invisible tetryon protection fields,

and then traversed another two hundred metres of greyish-blue dirt to the
fringe part of the Eastern perimeter, a plateau with rocky stubble called View Point 2.

‘See the blue flecks dancing around over there,’ said Reshmi, pointing beyond
the plastic table with the chessboard on top. ‘That’s the containment field.

Permanently active.’

Neither Lexi or I said a word.

It was impossible to.

Containment field and *blue flecks dancing* and no comment at all about the Middle-
Eastern guy standing corpse-still a few metres beyond, eyes open and blank, arms
peeled into jagged green strips, legs just a mass of darker green...*something*. Goo?
Sludge?

‘Any of you two know how to play chess?’

It took my brain a second to process the question, and another three after that
to form a rudimentary *no* response.

‘What did you do to him?’ asked Lexi, coping a little better.

‘If not, we’ll have to set up a different game.’

‘The green guy...over there.’

Reshmi looked past the vertical corpse, feigning confusion, then reeled back. ‘Ah, that’s what you’re gawping at. I thought you were talking about Neptune. Yeah, don’t be alarmed, it’s dead. Very deserved too. Don’t wanna go full Juana, but that sneaky little wretch tried to touch me mid-battle...right inside the brain muons...not to mention the things it got up to in that silly museum.’

You killed him was pointless so I edited to a more scientific, perhaps even sociopathic, approach. ‘How exactly did he die?’

‘That’s good, Keni. Adjustment.’ Reshmi moved to the edge of the containment field, seemingly unconcerned as the blue flecks began flickering close to her hair. ‘*It* died...the same way you or Lexi would. Only a little bit slower. Something about its mist-like parts storing oxygen for up to seventeen and a half hours. That’s what Assta said anyway.’

‘Assta is the AI...’

‘Which is why his legs look all green and mangled. An AI, yes, at their core. Quite dynamic though, flexible...at times. Lexitron, you feeling okay? Your face seems broken.’

Lexi shifted side-on against the plastic table, putting the dead djinn out of sight and replacing it with the generic ice-scape of Triton. I walked up to her non-table side and looked out at the same view.

Miles and miles and mega miles of frozen blue-ish grey tundra, some parts with green flakes of freshly chilled nitrogen sprinkled on top.

It was hard to know if it had been engineered by Reshmi, or was simply a natural lunar spasm, but a plume of gas erupted about fifty metres in front of us, activating our *shit, volcano* reflexes and forcing us a few steps back.

Reshmi laughed, pointing at the blue flecks zipping about erratically as the dust from the plume swept into the side of the containment field.

‘You’ll get used to it,’ she said, picking up the black queen on the chessboard and moving it five squares forward. ‘Lexitron.’

+++

After a *pop in and snap* viewing of the Steam Lab, the Battle Room, the Ball Bouncing Room, the Collage Room, and about fifteen different versions of *can we see Juana now?* from Lexi, we were led into a circular space, with a giant pulsating orb in the centre, and told that this was the newly created Dogged Eye Sanity Zone, repurposed and retooled from its previous incarnation as the Settle Haze Room.

Apparently, De-stress Room or Meditation Chamber would've been a more human-friendly name, but Reshmi had met a hippy in the 70's who used those words constantly and, every time she heard them now, she thought of his seven conceptual mansions and felt spiritually nauseous, so...

'Which one is Juana?' Lexi asked, scanning the four identical figures all sitting with their legs out straight, in different parts of the room.

'That is the point.'

'Huh?'

'Identity schism. In base terms, three are configurations created by the orb. Reflections of different neural paths the real Juana is attempting to construct in order to...balance the thing in her head...the urge to eat brains. Or something similar. To be honest, Asta's the one to ask about all this, she designed the thing.'

'You're going to cure her?' I asked, scrutinizing the nearest Juana.

'Readjust is a better word.'

'Safely?'

'In fact, looking at her now, she's doing much better than I thought she would. After that Israeli neo-fascist debacle, the Sadia rejection...'

Lexi moved forward, swerving left as the orb pulsed a brighter shade of purple. 'Can we talk to her?'

'You can talk *at* her...but she won't be able to hear you.'

'She's in a trance?'

The orb flashed another vivid burst of purple, sending Lexi closer to the wall and within a few feet of one of the four Juana types.

‘Time to show you your room. In the Humanology Wing. I have a feeling you’ll like it.’

‘Sounds a bit weird,’ I said, mentally playing back the words.

‘Humanology Wing? Yeah, that’s exactly what Keith said. *Like a zoo experiment, man.* But it’s fine. Fitted and furnished to make you think you’re on a human base. A base from one of your VR projections, obviously, not the primitive things they’re pitching on the moon.’

‘*Pluto 2270...*’

‘It even has your media embedded...a bigger selection than *GENTE+* in fact...lots of that *Doctor Who* thing you like, classic sci-fi books, old music, new music...romantic pornography, abject pornography, animal-...hey Lexitron, door, come on.’

I tracked Reshmi’s outstretched hand and saw Lexi nudging her foot into Juana’s thigh and saying, ‘wah,’ when it passed right through.

‘I’m serious, stop fucking about with the hologram. You’ll see the real Juana tomorrow. Okay?’

Lexi stared at her own foot as the words faded, then looked over at the closest Juana and said [in quite a defiant tone], ‘tomorrow.’

+++

Reshmi wasn’t wrong about the Humanology Wing.

The corridors had lemonade pink walls, doors with high numbers on them, art canvases hung up – or levitated up as there didn’t appear to be any nails behind them - every few metres, all of which appeared to show the same face; an elderly professor type, two side clumps of grey hair and telescope lens glasses, each one deconstructed in a marginally distinctive way.

‘Guy looks kind of familiar...’ I whispered to Lexi, who tilted her head at the blue pixel piece and said, ‘yeah, I think it’s Mario Caiano.’

‘Who?’

‘*Nightmare Castle* director. Had the same type of glasses.’

Nodding robotically, I pretended to give the next painting along a closer look then moved on to the door ahead, the one Reshmi was clicking open.

The room inside was equally *human*. Carpeted floor, TV screen hovering by the wall, king-sized bed, a window with drawn curtains that looked out onto Earth scenery you could change with a human-type remote control.

If I hadn’t been told...or readjusted to accept things by the purple mist...I would really have thought I was staying in another Californian hostel.

‘To be blunt, most of the stuff is stolen,’ said Reshmi, clamping a firm hand on my shoulder. ‘But you don’t really care about that, do you?’

‘Not really,’ I said, watching Lexi peel off the deep red cycling jacket Reshmi had given us earlier [before the tetryon fields] and plunge backwards onto the bed.

‘Exactly the right attitude to have given your current context. First humans on Triton since Keith David and Kei Fujiwara. Just settle in, get some rest. Enjoy each other’s company.’

‘The *rest* part sounds good.’

The shoulder clamp turned into a fierce massage, with Reshmi’s eyes shining that old warning flare lilac. I shifted a bit, trying to slip free, and then stopped as the hard pinching sensation dissipated and the soothing glove of god took its place, making my shoulder blades feel as if they were made of artisanal dough.

‘That’s better...’ said Reshmi, finally releasing her grip and turning to Lexi, who was now under the duvet with the remote control in her hand. ‘I recommend your favourite, *Nightmare Castle*. It’s a director’s cut that never got officially released and...you’ll definitely like the changes. I’m sure of it.’

‘Director’s cut...’ Lexi muttered, pressing buttons.

‘See you in the morning then. And don’t worry about over-sleeping, the purple has set an internal alarm in your subconscious. Nagging *and* deluxe. Don’t worry, it’ll make sense when it happens. Purple helps with base directions too, so there’s no chance of getting lost. I think that’s all of it. If there is anything else, call for Assta.’

‘You mean she’ll appear...in here?’

‘Right there in the bed between you, fully naked, if that’s what you want? Nah, don’t say *err*, I’m joking. *They’ll* knock on the door first, then come in if you don’t open it within two seconds. And they don’t need rest like us biologicals do, so any hour of the night is okay. But nothing trivial...they get annoyed if you do that. Trust me.’

After that, Reshmi was out the door and gone, to the Alienology Wing probably. Whatever that looked like.

Liquid helium pools? Gas pods?

And what form would she revert to?

I sat down on the edge of the bed and started pulling off my shoes.

It hadn’t been in my head for a while, not with all the other distractions, but now that we were physically on Triton, in an alien base...what did Reshmi really look like?

Part of me recalled her mentioning helmets earlier, when we were going through the tunnel with the yellow suns on the walls, and she did say she would die outside the containment field if she stayed long enough...which meant she had to be at least a little bit similar to humans.

Carbon based?

Sucking in oxygen and...what else?

‘Found it,’ said Lexi, kicking me gently with her duvet-covered foot. ‘Wah, she was telling the truth, it’s a director’s cut. Fuck, I’ve never even heard of this. An actual, real director’s cut. I’m putting it on.’

Taking off my red cycling jacket, I looked at the screen and squinted as the actress I'd forgotten the name of drank from a full glass of brandy and told her husband she may miss him while he was away.

'Same so far,' muttered Lexi, kicking out again with her foot, telling me to get in bed and snuggle up to her before the death scenes started.

'Right now?'

'It's Triton. I need your body warmth.'

My brain immediately set off the warning signal, running through the recent litany of failed fucks, the lack of any kind of reaction to Lexi's body, or anyone's body, even VR ones with which there was no pressure to interact and

I mumbled a *yes*, but stayed pinned to the edge of the bed going back to the screen and

the actress who'd said she may miss her husband, the brandy drinker, was with a different man now, pulling him down onto the floor of the greenhouse and kissing his neck and

the director did a fade-cut onto a giant four-poster bed, raising the camera up and over the two lovers as the clothes-less man pushed his dick inside her and

'Is this...?' I started to say, turning to Lexi and killing the rest of my line as she stared forward at the screen, left hand moving under the duvet and

I had no idea when or how it happened but

my fingers were on her calf, moving up, along the inside of her thigh and

'Mark...?' Lexi called, throwing off half the duvet while her other hand started pulling up the *Lavinia* t-shirt.

I crawled over like a quantum drunk, those exact words in my head, helping her get off the blue Goddess of Death, kissing cheeks, lips, nipples, then skipping the pointless neck part and going straight down, pulling off knickers, kissing thighs, clit, lab, other parts I couldn't name, and then losing it completely, telling her, 'I just need to get in,' as she grabbed my dick and pulled me inside.

On the screen behind us, the lovers of *Nightmare Castle* continued their fucking, character moans and grunts bleeding into our own and then detaching again as I panted out, ‘too fucking good,’ into Lexi’s semi-green mop of hair
tried to pull out
got clamped by hands on my ass, on my back
heard *fucking fuck me* and
came inside her.

+++

There were no tissues nearby, so I had to go out into the corridor of elderly man deconstructions and into the bathroom opposite. The walls were lemonade pink too, and spotless.

Washing her hands at the sink was Reshmi, eyes vivid purple.
‘Good film?’ she asked, observing me through the mirror.
‘Toilet,’ I said back, vanishing quickly into the cubicle.
‘I knew you’d like it.’

+++

Back in the room, the director’s cut continued, as did the sex scenes.

The murdered ghosts of the actress, who Lexi reminded me was called Barbara Steele, and her caretaker lover fucked in seven different [empty] rooms, all with clear-cut penetration shots.

‘No way this could ever have been released,’ I said, stroking the tips of Lexi’s green hair.

‘Or filmed,’ she replied, playing with my thumb. ‘Not in the 60’s.’
‘Maybe they were hypnotized...by a certain alien trickster from Triton.’
‘I prefer the illusion theory.’

'You mean the filmn itself?'

Lexi mumbled a *yeah* and then drifted off into the filmn that may or may not have been a shared hallucination. For a while, I followed the thread, linking my sudden sexual urge to Reshmi's firm hand on my shoulder and then to the obvious correlation that she was the one who had caused my impotence in the first place. Or Nick had. And then sat there observing me as I lost my fucking mind.

When exactly had they done it?

Lake Arrowhead?

The Reagan Cult Shack?

And what was she gonna do next now that we were stuck on Triton with her...for how long?

Until she got bored?

Months?

Years?

Moaning sounds from the screen brought me back as the caretaker's dick once again slid inside the monochrome hole and, a minute later, Lexi was on top of me leaning back so we could both see it telling me she missed this me and her missed it so fucking much so so so fucking much fucking caretaker cat fucking-

+++

After the filmn, we lay there and watched another director's cut we'd found in the *GENTE+* archives, *Void Galaxia*.

There was pornographic fucking in this one too

alien holes and tentacles, human confusion, gas emissions

but the plot was changed

the quite interesting monologues from the alien mystic and the alien technician,
the quantum tunnel scene, green-skinned Kontolian in holo-suit of her own self, *what
would he be doing with a neutrino scanner*

all gone

so I just stroked Lexi's green hair, dormant, asking at some point if she'd ever
go through a wormhole, given the chance?

And then a supplement, would she consider staying on Triton full time?

'No,' she replied, *muito* curt, pulling the duvet up over her shoulder.

'For a year? A month?'

'Filmn.'

'Just...no?'

'I'm trying to watch.'

I nodded, turning back to see the alien that looked like a tulip opening its petals,
either about to eat the human below, or fuck them.

Or perhaps something else.

Lick them?

+++

As promised, a purple suggestion repeated several times – *pen, not syringe, pen, not
syringe, pen* - got us out of bed early and [after a quick half episode of *Doctor Who*]
back over to the seventy-year old lobby for a human-style breakfast.

There were fewer holograms lounging around compared to the previous day,
but the ones who were there were quite chatty, some of them even coming over to us
on the high stools by the window and asking [in various accents] if we were from
Pluto-Cha.

'Where's that?'

‘Or are you those inner system types they keep shipping in?’

‘Inner system...you mean Earth?’

‘Ah, Jovian haze...the bunkers in Io...am I right?’

‘Err...’

‘You know you don’t have to answer them,’ cut in Reshmi, seating herself on the stool next to me, a cup of coffee in one hand and *Moon Prison* in the other.

‘Excuse me, we’re not furniture,’ protested the Thai-looking woman in the bored pineapple t-shirt.

‘Couch is that way, Sali.’

‘Wah...unbelievable. Not even an attempt at decorum.’

‘Would you like to be deleted?’

‘I think I preferred it when you were sulking in the Steam Lab.’ The Thai-looking hologram turned my way, forcing a smile. ‘I’m sorry in advance for having to put up with this one. Truly a special case.’

‘Five, four, three, two...’

Reshmi pointed at the couch on the opposite side of the lobby and whispered one and zero as the Thai-looking hologram fizzled out and rematerialized in the designated place. Shouting out something presumably in gutter Thai, she grabbed a pale green cocktail from the table and slumped down onto the cushions, almost clipping the man in the green yukata, who appeared too out of it to say anything.

‘Wah, they really act so real...’ said Lexi, dipping her spoon into what Assta assured us was real muesli and fresh milk. ‘Way more than the NPCs in VR.’

‘Of course they do, the tech’s more advanced. But you’re still dealing with constructs, on a base level.’

‘I don’t know...the way they interacted with us...’

‘...is a mirage. That thing she just yelled in Thai? One of four set phrases she’s programmed to use in response to being slighted. The furniture line? Heard that about five hundred times, exact same intonation. You stay here long enough, you’ll hear it again too.’

‘Can’t you expand their programming?’ I asked, prodding at the floating bits of muesli in my bowl.

‘Ah, a follow up, great.’

‘Make them more adaptable maybe?’

‘No, they’re already adaptable. To the nth degree. And no, I don’t wanna go into the details of that.’

‘What about your fellow aliens? Do they talk to them?’

Reshmi let out a jet of coffee breath, modifying it with little stutter sounds of *juh juh juh juh*. ‘Gods, you’re persistent.’

‘Are they here now, on the base somewhere?’

‘Okay, how about we leave the alien inquisition for later and go play the game I’ve set up outside? I’ll give you a hint, it’s not chess.’

‘Uno?’ I said, picking up my cup and peering at the brown flakes on the surface.

‘Second hint. It’s not a child’s game.’

‘Poker?’

‘Okay, stop guessing and just come outside. The equipment’s all set up. I even removed the djinn exhibit so you wouldn’t get distracted.’

‘What about our breakfast?’

‘Hmm. Well, you are nursing it a bit...but fine, suppose there’s no real rush.’

‘*Obrigado...*’

‘Back in a minute,’ said Lexi, sliding off the stool, grabbing her cup and wandering off to the back of the lobby.

‘That was abrupt.’

‘I think she’s getting a coffee refill,’ I lied, glancing back and seeing Lexi maneuvering to different sides of Assta and then outright pursuing her when she teleported to the part of the lobby with the series of white splashes on the wall. The inevitable decay of a white dwarf star in eleven stages, according to Reshmi, though she’d been smirking when she’d said it so maybe not.

‘Here’s an old friend of yours from the hostel.’

‘What?’ I turned back, seeing her tapping the cover of *Moon Prison*.

‘You’ll have time to finish it now you’re here. And start on your own work. The long-awaited *Yellow Muon Blob*. With Lexi relaxing seductively in the background, Barbara Steele style.’

‘Yeah...’ I said, drifting out to the ice fields.

‘Or she can try writing something too. Mind is definitely erratic enough for it. Even more so after all that’s happened. In fact...no, I won’t say it. Too divisive. Stick to your thing, Keni. As long as you don’t magpie your way through it...or steal the Uranus sub-plot from *Moon Prison*. Or the Xaaa character...’

I shifted my eyes to Reshmi, vaguely aware that she was still talking, then quickly floated over to the Thai-looking hologram in the *bored pineapple* t-shirt and mustard yellow shorts.

Possibly still sulking from the Reshmi insults, she was stuck to a book with *DETERMINISM IS* in huge red capitals on the cover.

Or holo-reading it with her holo-eyes and holo-interpretative circuits, turning each holo-page with her holo-fingers, processing the plot and themes with her holo-

‘You seem distant, Keni,’ said Reshmi, off-screen.

‘Not really...’

‘Not happy on Triton?’

Picking up my coffee with a no-look grab, I squinted at the Thai hologram’s book cover, trying to read the smaller text subtitle. Then turned when I felt something hit my elbow. It was the corner edge of *Moon Prison*, pushed by the Indian-skinned puppet master.

‘Too alien for you?’

‘Actually, everything’s pretty comfortable,’ I said, putting my cup on top of the book.

‘Well, a good host...’

‘Like one of those future-themed hotels in Austria or Nagano. Not alien at all.’

It was supposed to be a trivial line, but it seemed to hit Reshmi hard as her eyes flared purple yet again, honing in on the disintegrated/disintegrating white dwarf splashes on the far wall.

‘You wouldn’t understand it,’ she mumbled loud enough to be heard, then another word that sounded like *ant*.

Probably would, I thought, picking up *Moon Prison* and flicking to the back pages. If you stopped fucking around with my genitals and dead djinns and actually shared with us something concrete.

With your friends, I added quickly, remembering her claim of telepathic powers.

Luckily, she was still engrossed in the white dwarf death slide, so I took a sip of coffee and pretended to read the end of *Moon Prison*.

With the occasional sneak glimpse of Neptune in the background.

Friends...

Was that what we all were?

‘Ah, the coffee seeker...’ Reshmi said after a minute or two of silence, tapping the table.

I put my finger on a line I wasn’t even reading and looked up.

It was Lexi, back from her trip.

‘Try to ask Assta where all the others are,’ she whispered tight in my ear, sitting back down on her stool with a fresh cup of coffee, which she held up as evidence to our alien host.

‘What?’ I whispered back, disguising it as a kiss.

‘I just tried...three times. Said it was beyond my limits.’

‘Limits?’

‘Now it’s your turn. Go.’

I took another sip of coffee then put the cup down on the window-side counter, shook my head at the view, said *wah* when a plume of nitrogen gas spurted out a few hundred metres away, ignored the knee jabs on my thigh from Lexi, stared generally

at Neptune, pictured chandelier hotels, mining orbs, diamond rain and, finally, got bored enough to walk over to Assta and ask her Lexi's question.

'It is beyond your limits,' she replied, preparing what looked like a giant syringe for...something.

'Is Nick...sorry, Reshmi...is she alone here?'

'It is beyond your limits.'

'Is that an automated response?'

'No.'

'What are you putting in that syringe?'

'It is also beyond your limits.'

I nodded, noticing that both Reshmi and Lexi were looking my way. Okay, time to move. In a smooth fashion. Opting for the scenic way back, I stopped next to the Thai hologram planted on the couch and asked her where all the other aliens were.

She looked up, too fast to have been genuinely reading her book, and replied in a puzzled tone, 'it's an open base. They're everywhere.'

'They're here now?'

She turned left, gesturing with the edge of her book at a man who looked like he was cosplaying an Ondōan from *Beyond the Rabbit Hole*.

I nodded, thanking her for the help, then returned to my stool.

Sipped lukewarm coffee.

Glanced at the blurb of *Moon Prison* and muttered, 'beyond their limits.'

'What?'

'Nothing.'

'Are you speaking in some kind of code?'

'No.'

Reshmi looked at me, tilted her head and stared [forcing me back down to the back cover of *Moon Prison*]...hummed an unfamiliar melody...cut it short...said she missed my blonde hair and blue dot dress combo. Then, when that got no reaction, told the two of us that she'd made a list of places we could go within the local vicinity.

‘Does it include Earth?’ asked Lexi, stirring her coffee.

‘Where?’

‘Earth. Our home planet.’

That got a long stretch of silence, and a lot of staring off at the ice fields. So much staring that I started to think she’d actually spotted something important.

But then she turned back and said, with a barely cloaked tone of irritation, ‘Earth. Sure. Why not?’

After that, she left her stool and told us it was time for her to take the usual morning walk outside.

‘Should we come?’ I asked, half picking up my red cycling jacket from the back of the stool, but it went unheard as Reshmi was already halfway across the lobby, taking the *DETERMISIM IS* book out of the Thai-hologram’s lap and throwing it at the white dwarf chaos as she left.

As with the glass from the previous day, it vanished into nothingness the precise moment it hit its target.

‘That wasn’t very reassuring,’ said Lexi, shuffling her muesli around the bowl.

‘She did say *yes*, technically.’

‘Same way she did with Portland.’

I looked across the lobby, spotting Assta in a statue pose with her giant syringe. Reshmi had told us she could sense through your brain patterns when you needed her to appear, which was clearly an exaggeration as I was thinking her name now and getting nothing.

Assta, I thought, literally prodding my head forward to get it over to her.

It worked, finally.

There was flicker of light, a vanishing then a pale yellow woman standing to my right, still clutching the giant syringe. ‘Yes?’

‘I want to ask...is it possible to go back to Earth?’

‘It is.’

‘For us too?’

‘For anyone.’

‘How?’ asked Lexi, taking her spoon out of the bowl and accidentally flicking milk drops through Assta’s face and onto the carpet behind.

‘It is beyond your limits.’

Lexi nudged my hand, tagging me in.

‘How?’ I tried.

‘It is beyond your limits.’

‘Oh.’

‘Is that all?’

I shrugged and Lexi went back to her muesli, which was obviously enough of a signal for Assta to flicker-teleport to her original position.

‘Wonder why she’s holding that thing,’ I said, looking over and then changing to, ‘wah, is that Juana,’ when I caught sight of the Mexican walking out from the rear arch.

‘*Foda...* she looks lost,’ said Lexi, as we watched the sleepy-looking Yaqui muddle her way through and around the couches, stopping at one point and staring down at the Ondōan hologram’s scalp, then resuming her passage and reeling back in self-surprise when she saw the window [presumably her own ghost-like reflection].

Taking the stool next to Lexi, she accepted the bowl of muesli that Assta placed in front of her, and the coffee that followed it, then told us in a soft voice that everything looked faintly purple.

‘Everything?’

‘Faces, décor, this coffee...the sky outside.’ She put her right palm flat over her cup, closing her eyes. Waited a few seconds. Opened them again. ‘The back of my hand. Fingernails.’

‘It’ll fade...’

‘I feel okay though. Brighter today. Clearer thoughts.’

‘Clear is good.’

‘*Si?*’

Outside the window, another plume of nitrogen gas shot up towards the still semi-ludicrous backdrop of Neptune, the resulting dust-drizzle causing the blue specks shielding the front of the base to mobilise.

Then, a couple of minutes later, another one erupted.

And then another.

And then another.

Until I had the idea of making a game out of it.

Predict the nitrogen gas eruption/plume/spurt/killing fog.

Bonus points if it aggravates the containment field.

‘Aggravates as in makes those blue bits flicker,’ I clarified, sucking up the dregs of the coffee...glancing at the rim of the cup...briefly thinking Fresno, Lake Arrowhead, Saizeriya...before looking up and seeing Neptune again. ‘What do you think? Worth playing?’

‘Guess the next spurt...’ muttered Lexi, eyes already scanning the ice fields.

‘The general area, yeah.’

‘Hmm.’

‘Is that a positive hmm?’

‘Long as I don’t have to move from this stool.’

‘Good. We’re set then. Juana?’

‘There. On the left.’ She put out a crooked hand, pointing at a spurt nearby that had just erupted. ‘Do I get a point?’

The containment field flickered blue, letting in foreign molecules.

‘Sì? No?’

‘We haven’t started yet. All three of us have to be...’

‘Cheater.’

‘...looking out the window. Huh? Me?’

‘Just give her the point,’ said Lexi, taking my cup, frowning at the lack of coffee left in it. ‘She did see the spurt...gas plume...whatever.’

‘I saw it even earlier, but my arm was stuck...too slow to point at it.’

‘Technically, you’re supposed to predict it, not-...’

‘Sensed it, not saw. *Sì*, predict, that too.’

‘Okay...’

‘But?’

‘...Juana gets a point...for being extremely alert...and predicting the first spurt.’

‘Agreed.’

Lexi coughed into the rim of my cup, possibly a laugh, then shot up and almost clipped me on the ear as her hand jabbed at the window. ‘There, over there...plume.’

‘Err...’

‘One point to Lexi.’

‘Nice prediction,’ added Juana, patting the air near Lexi’s shoulder.

‘Obrigada.’

‘That’s really a point?’

‘Results so far; one point to Juana, one point to me, zero to the complaining sceptic. Let’s make it first to ten so it isn’t endless. Juana?’

‘If it is me, *sì*.’

‘Complaining sceptic?’

I hunched forward, eyes on the bottom line of the window, cutting out the dagger thought of *fucking cheat witch cunts*, annoyed at the idea that a plume might burst up and be denied as prediction if I saw it, resigned to losing the game I’d just invented, paranoid that at some point Lexi would get drunk and fuck Juana and realise it was better to be with her than me cos Juana would lick longer and

I looked back up

saw both of them pointing at the ice-scape with circus astonishment

heard, ‘two points each, sceptic still on zero,’

closed my eyes

blackened out the base Neptune Triton and



The murdered dead return as ghosts

Steele burns scientist husband alive while gardener love-toy reduces Solange to skeleton form by draining the blood

in seven minute tour of black and white mansion-scape

Lexi watching rapt

me not far behind

stretched out on our own sides of the bed naked duvet on her not me

then not on Lexi either as she's up

hand pulling hair to the left trying to make it stick failing but still trying

if I were back in the 60's *that* Italy, she says, I'd have a chance a gardener's

chance

but here

it won't go left and stay there keeps bouncing back

just wanna show one eyeball

like B

B of no fluent Italian, B of-

maybe it's the green parts weight of the dye

maybe I need a wig of some kind clip back the under hair then pull left if they
have that kind of thing on this base probably not yet
on the screen Steele's eyeball grew cultivated effortless
attracting me on some level away from Lexi and her *Lavinia G Of Death* t-shirt
pink and neon
hologrammatic to the promise of

+++

Day four...four or five...embedded fossil-like in the Humanology Wing, my
back against the wall without plasma conduits running inside, trying once again to
finish the infinite long march that was becoming *Moon Prison*.

Or allow the ending to intercept, as Bōl put it.

How I thought she'd put it.

To be honest, I wasn't really sure, that module was a long time distant now, as
was the Unii itself, and the articles on BBB were currently inaccessible due to the lack
of on-base internet, which made sense as it wasn't a human thing we were lodging in.

Not a human structure.

Human complex.

'The problem with Eris is it's full of Erisians...who aren't even from there.'

I paused, tapping the page.

It was the thirteenth time I'd read that line and the block paragraph right after
it...and I just couldn't be bothered. The whole act of reading...seemed pointless
somehow. Absurd on some level.

I closed the book, then opened it again, flicking through the remaining pages.

Twenty-seven left.

If I forced myself, I could get it done within an hour. Then make a start on
chapter three of *Yellow Muon Blob*. Then have some form of viable defence when

Reshmi appeared later...out of the plasma conduits...and asked why I hadn't done anything yet.

But I couldn't do it.

Not this shit.

Moon Prison.

Moon Prison.

First hundred, hundred and fifty pages...correct. A prison on the moon.

The rest of it...freewheeling, chaotic...a picaresque crawl through the colonies of the Kuiper Belt...if picaresque meant what I thought it did.

Kusoooooooo...

What was I doing with this thing?

I put the front cover flat on the floor and slid it over to the slim metal cylinder that Reshmi claimed was the positron modulator...modulating the positrons to levels safe enough for a human to tolerate.

Typed out *Kristeeeeeeeeeva* on the padd.

Then *Kristeva*.

Picked up the new book that materialised out of nothingness.

'Powers Past Horrorr r.'

Opened it up to a random page and read the tenth line down.

'And yet, in these times of regurgitated solutions, what is the point of emphasizing the lack of horror beyond the horror of being?'

Paused, re-read, fingered the vaguer terms – *lack, beyond, being* – attempted a guess at the theory without going back to the introduction or requesting *NOTES ON KRISTEVA LATER YEARS*, failed, tried again, gave up, thought of Lexi on our bed, naked, the look on her face as I pulled out, tissue already in hand to catch loose cum, half an eye on the TV screen, Barbara Steele, Barbara Steele, one eyeball, so pretty, so blank...

Was this something that could be stretched out permanently?

For a whole year?

I got up off the floor, picked up *Moon Prison* again.

Found the right page.

‘The problem with Eris is it’s full of Erisians...who aren’t even from there.’

Me in here.

Her with the holograms.

Nightmare Castle after hours.

Sex once a day, once a week, once a month, four times a year, whenever moons happened to collide or align, threaten.

And then what?

I turned the page, determined to finish, shrieking for a match

Moon Prison, Moon Prison, Moon Prison Moon Prison Moon Prison

+++

If I couldn’t be found in the Humanology Wing, I was most likely in the lobby, planted on the same stool I’d picked out on the first day, viewing the ice-scape, listening in on the holograms, guessing what drink I had etc. etc.

This time I was eavesdropping on Lexi, who was going through broken Portuguese with the Thai-looking hologram [the other responding bizarrely in Japanese], and occasionally shifting left, prodding Assta to reveal Reshmi’s language, just a few words or phrases, something to startle her with.

‘That is beyond your limits,’ was the initial response, followed quickly by, ‘that is not a good idea,’ when Assta realized the first line wasn’t really applicable.

‘I think she’d like it...someone attempting to learn her tongue.’

‘Not a good idea.’

‘Why not?’

‘The psychology is beyond your limits.’

‘Reshmi’s?’

‘Focus on the human language catalogue, it is calmer.’

Lexi clearly wasn't done, judging by the way she launched up out of the couch, but the act was too slow as Assta had already dematerialized and this time she didn't refashion herself over by the white splashes of post-decay star, she didn't refashion herself anywhere, just purely vapourised herself, gone, traceless.

Staying half-launched for a second, Lexi glanced over at me, saw the pile of books on the counter [not all *Moon Prison*], then returned to the guy in the yukata [stroking a metal tube on the adjacent couch].

Ah, my Japanese not good enough/ thank god she's speaking Japanese to him not me.

She looks a bit tired today.

Don't wanna fuck on the bed, maybe the Steam Lab.

Six episodes or four?

Bingeing gives me a headache even if it is Doctor Who.

What is this, Baudrillard?

I blinked, re-examined the book laid open in front of me.

'Rationalism returns, briefly. The narrator is no longer looking for anything, and has no intent of discovery. In awe of retrograde, activities progress. The building, fearing a surge towards the outer void, begins to slowly absorb the narrator. Gives itself an old name: mausoleumm.'

No, not Baudrillard, something else.

That I was also unequipped for.

Kuso...

Frustrated, and with the odd sensation that Reshmi was about to appear, I stared out the window at the nitrogen plumes.

Reshmi did not appear.

Maybe she was still in the Forbidden Room?

That didn't even have a handle, or password padd.

That she'd laughed at when she called it *Forbidden*.

'Only in the sense that you can't get in there...not that you shouldn't.'

'Can we go in there?'

‘No. Never.’

‘Then it is forbidden?’

‘Wah...only three days and already this casual. Maybe you need a reminder as to what the hierarchy is around here.’

Neither Lexi nor myself knew exactly what that meant at the time...I suspected another strop, maybe some pyro-kinetics...but when nothing [terrible/glaring] happened we realized that she just wanted to scare us, give the idea that something might happen. Which it still might, if base life got boring enough for her. Based on her previous behaviour...back on Earth.

Back on Earth.

Still felt strange to say it...to think it.

Earth...Triton...

A plume outside got my attention, pulling me right.

Wah, there was Juana...in tight next to the containment shield, only a few yards from the re-installed djinn corpse...legs crossed like an amateur yoga instructor.

What the hell was she doing?

Dipping her finger into the shield?

It wasn't that close, but that's what it looked like.

Maybe not actually touching, but-

Kuso...

I folded up the book I didn't really understand and pushed the stool back, then stood there caught between two missions.

Go out there and pull Juana back a bit.

Walk into a random corridor and stare at the plasma conduits.

And then a third.

Read a different book. Non philosophy.

And a fourth.

Find Reshmi, barrage her with questions about her home world, physiology, life over the last century before she met me, base operations, Assta.

And then a reiteration of the third.

Sit down, read a different book.

Finish the last twenty pages of *Moon Prison*, brain willing.

I sat down, tucking the stool in close.

Stared out the window and watched Juana in the near distance.

Poking the blue flecks with her finger.

Holding an open book in the other hand.

Hopefully not Sadia's poetry again.

Or that Norse mythology thing...the one white supremacists liked.

Grab Valhalla?

Grip Valhalla?

The plume died down, the containment field mellowed, and the Yaqui appeared to sense that I was observing her as she dropped the book and looked over.

For some reason I said, 'hi.'

She may have said *hi* back, I didn't know, it was too far to make out her lips.

'You think this mess just makes itself?'

I shivered, turning to face the lobby.

'A whole hour I've been doing this...and not one of you came over to help.'

Reshmi was standing there, a black apron with *NICK* in red letters skewed to one side, a pan of fried something in her left hand.

'Well? Excuses? Anything?'

I looked over at Lexi, who was nodding at the guy in the yukata, trying to catch his faint Japanese.

'Don't conspire, I'm asking you direct. You who has been sat here all morning. Why did you not come into the kitchen zone and help me?'

'Sorry...I didn't know it was-...didn't see you.'

'The sign with KITCHEN ZONE...'

'Didn't know you were making breakfast either. But I'll help next time, I promise.'

‘... ..’

‘What?’

‘Come to the table if you want to eat something.’ Reshmi added a growl and then switched eyes to the Viewing Platform outside, growling again. ‘*Kuso*. I’ll go and throw a fucking net over Juana...’

‘I can go and tell her.’

‘...drag her back in. No, you’re going to the table. But no eating until we’re all there. And don’t let Lexi talk to that yukata guy so much, he’s a pervert. In fact, go get her now, tell her brunch is ready. Drag her off that couch.’

‘Okay...’

‘Unless you’re feeling bored again. In which case, do nothing.’

I nodded and repeated *okay*, then took the pan as she strolled over to the lobby exit and, a minute later, walked out onto moon terrain.

Bored?

Of what?

+++

Breakfast/brunch the next three days was again cooked by Reshmi, a different dish each time, but later, after we’d cleared away the plates and the cook had gone off to the Steam Lab, we found out from a whispering Assta that meals weren’t made the human way on base, they were simply conjured up out of lapsed matter

which was actually my original suspicion [based on sci-fi memories]

Lexi’s too

minus the *lapsed matter* terminology.

Juana?

Busy throwing moon dust at the containment shield, *interrogating the dead djinn*, her words.

None of us said anything to Reshmi about the cooking, of course.

Out of fatigue, not fear.

Yup.

We were too tired to be scared.

Maybe even numb.

Or logical?

Why bring guests to your home and then turn on them?

Didn't make sense.

Não faz sentido.

Even for her.

+++

'Is it half the same as human physiology?'

'Forty per cent?'

'Lower?'

'Does she need to eat, drink, have sex, sleep?'

'Is the brain more rational than ours?'

'Is it they or she or he, the original form?'

'Are the others really on base somewhere?'

'Do they know about us?'

'That we're here?'

'Have other humans been here before, stayed in the same rooms?'

Neither Lexi or I expected much of a response from Assta beyond *that is beyond your limits*, so it was a mild surprise when, after saying nothing for almost half of lunch [and checking that Reshmi was still outside playing UNO with Juana], she sat between us on the couch and said, 'there is a graveyard on the eastern side of the base, it is forbidden to go there.'

'Graveyard...of aliens?'

'That definition is vague. If you mean humans, then yes.'

‘People are buried there?’

‘Previous guests. Correct. The last one was an actor named Keith David. I believe he died of heart failure.’

‘Err...and the others?’

‘A variety of ways. Old age, lung cancer, axe, laser burst, sudden fall down the rock slope over there, near the expired djinn, poison, knife, table.’

‘Wait, you mean...they were murdered?’

Assta tilted her head at Lexi, her expression matching the grey state of nothing. ‘The majority occurred during Reshmi’s petty era. Almost half a century ago. You do not need to worry excessively.’

‘She actually killed them?’

‘With an axe?’

The hologram’s face turned to pixels, then to residue, then to average lobby air. Somewhere behind, a familiar voice sounded out, telling us to stop asking the same fucking questions, it was exhausting.

‘And as for Keith David...’ Reshmi added, arriving at the couch, arm in arm with a blank-looking Juana, ‘he was with me to the very end. On amicable terms.’ She paused, studying the table. ‘No, correction: he was on base to the very end. I was actually in Quetta when he died. But still...amicable...a good friend. Almost never complained...about anything. Helped with meals. Smiled every once in a while. Unlike you wretches.’

Instinct said *smile*, maybe to Lexi and Juana too, but it didn’t translate.

‘Gods, I love humans. So confused.’

‘Us?’

‘Like apes next to a graviton emitter.’

‘*Estoy cansada...*’

‘Infinitely fun.’

+++

The three of us confused apes lay slab-like on the bed, trying the director's cut Lexi had found a few minutes earlier.

The Long Hair Of Death // Margheriti

Barbara Steele masturbating with a twig before her stake burning. Then, as the reborn seductress, masturbating again in her bedchamber. And again in the passage between the walls. And again on the ramparts of Castle Schweiiiiinschweiiinstein. And again in front of the Count's elderly mother. And again in the studio pool. And again on-

'There's no way any of this is real...' said Lexi, during each new scene.

'Probably not,' I agreed, frowning.

Was it beyond Barbara Steele, the actress?

Yes.

Was it beyond Reshmi?

Hmm...

'I remember the original filmn,' started Juana, hand a faint yellow colour similar to that of the base caretaker, fingers hovering close to her knicker line, 'Barbara Steele came close to showing her breasts for the first time. I was quite excited about that. Happy that she didn't really show them also. I think it's-...the tape of this is in the video caffe. If we ever go back. I think I will. Another week or two, then I'll go. Ask Reshmi to drop me back in Fresno. *Si*, this base is okay. A cold feeling sometimes but okay. Have you talked to the Thai hologram? She's quite pretty. Based on a real actress too. According to Assta, the base has a huge archive of historical human figures to interact with. Each with a high degree of autonomy. I may look for Isabella Adjani later. And *mi querida* Varo. Maybe a younger Kristeva, if I have time.'

I shuffled right, trying not to see Juana's fingers dipping between her own thighs.

'To do what?' asked Lexi, eyes on a masturbating B.

'*Sencilla*. Interact...'

‘Sexually?’

‘...on a spiritual level, as equals. Sì. That too.’

+++

There was no further masturbation, only rubbing of thighs, and when Juana had gone and the film had ended, I turned to Lexi without physically turning, more like staring at the witch burning on screen as the film looped back to the start again, and asked if she wanted to interact with anyone famous and, after waiting for the flames to die out, she replied, ‘Bava,’ then pulled up the cover and pretended to sleep.

Pretended cos her breathing was too clear

her body too stiff

same way I had pretended to be sleeping that time, with Nick in my room,

before we’d gone to the US and

back in Liverpool

my family

Charlie and her mania, paranoia, hockey stick attack

knowing I wasn’t really Mark

the Japanese face

Ryu in the



'Most recently-fired workers would've gone to the KIK-DEPOT, or one of the SUN ROOMS, but Suni knew what they both offered and didn't want any of it. Besides, the SUN ROOMS would push her into a revenge scenario, which would quickly turn into hundreds of revenge scenarios, and she wasn't angry enough anymore for all that, how could she be, they'd all been arrested, and even if she wanted to do something more personal, she didn't know who actually did it, who threw the fatal dart, she didn't know any of their faces, she'd never actually visited the factory where Kito had worked...every time she went, she'd just waited in the RED POSSIBILITY ROOM nearby, so...

If she did go in the SUN ROOM, she'd need a face, and based on what she'd been reading and thinking of recently it'd probably end up being Bakunin.

I don't wanna throw darts at Bakunin, she thought, stopping next to LUM TAI DOR café.

Don't wanna throw anything at anyone, except maybe myself.

Or Sunt.

But only because she fired me.'

With good reason, I thought, dropping *Moon Prison* to knee level and then sliding it across the floor all the way to Kristeva.

Mrs. Céline My Sweet Abject wouldn't mind, she was dead.

At least I thought she was.

Last I'd heard.

Was she though?

On the other side of the lobby, Lexi fumbled through another line of Portuguese and got told immediately by the guy in the *Coffin Joe* t-shirt that it was half good, two thirds bad.

'Which part was wrong?' she asked back, ignoring the weird mathematics.

'Sound is too English. You use *recordar* instead of *lembrar*. Some other things I've forgotten now.'

There was no reply to that except a glare at Assta, who'd created this new hologram as a language partner specifically for Lexi [from nebulous input], then more Portuguese.

I picked up the note pad, the *JoJo* pen and started stabbing the page.

Around the edges of it.

Re-read my notes.

Hologram caretaker and shipwrecked alien plot abduction of human captives on Earth, using their yellow muon blob technology.

Other holograms help at some point?

Caretaker slowly warms to Japanese main character, then re-solidifies as threat.

Alien is killed halfway through after losing powers.

Too jarring?'

I moved the pen, drawing a spiral around and then through *jarring*.

Stabbed the edges again.

Looked up and suppressed a groan as Reshmi appeared, stopping briefly next to Assta and then taking a slow curve towards my stool.

‘Finished yet?’

‘No.’

‘I mean *Moon Prison*.’

‘Also no.’

‘Dude...Keni cat...it’s been nearly a week.’

I hunched forward, turning a page of the pad and hoping the notes weren’t dark enough to be seep through.

‘Perhaps some Portuguese to relax the neurons.’

‘I’m fine.’

‘Think about it. You can’t be much worse than Lexi...’

‘She’s doing okay.’

‘...almost incomprehensible.’

I turned back a few pages, pretended to review some random scribbles, then closed the pad and put my cocktail glass on top of it. Stared out at old uncle Neptune. The deep black flanking it on every side.

‘Have you thought about it yet?’

‘What?’

‘It’d be more of an achievement than writing dull chapter notes.’

I shook my head, feigning confusion.

‘Killing me off halfway...Assta falling in love with you.’

‘Assta what?’

‘Wah, I really must stop overpraising humans. To think...feeding you a gem like *Moon Prison* and you still can’t-...ah, why bother? This is why Portuguese is the way, Keni. No need to use your brain. Just copy the patterns and you’re silver.’

‘I haven’t written anything yet, I’m still-...’

‘Or dilithium. Much more valuable. Okay, stick to your notes then. I’m going to find Juana, see if she’s up for a game of chess outside. Hopefully the poor sap’s not still staring at that plasma conduit. If she is...’

Reshmi pushed the stool she hadn’t sat down on back under the counter, blew a kiss at Neptune, then headed off to the corridor exit that led to...somewhere.

Not the Alienology Wing.

The third section... with all the forbidden doors...and that metal pillar with the pink orb on top.

I still wasn’t sure what it was exactly - only looked at it once, briefly - so I left the notepad and went over to ask Assta, *what is that pink orb*, but as I got close, she spotted me and de-materialised instantly, before I could raise a hand and say *hey*, and, doing a full three sixty of the lobby, I realized she wasn’t gonna be materializing back.

Had she also read my notes?

The seduction scene?

Did Reshmi tell her something?

Kuso...

+++

Keeping the pink orb pinned to a child’s recreation of my own frontal lobe, I walked out the same exit Reshmi had taken and followed the chain of corridors and turns and alien-text signs until I reached my target.

Again the door was wide open, and the pink orb was calling me in.

I responded, walking closer.

At that point, I had already decided I was gonna touch it cos if it were dangerous, or deadly, they wouldn’t have left the door open like that.

It was dilithium logic

And putting skin to orb

I lost breath

instantly

became weightless

drifting up two thirds of the way to the ceiling and back out the door, residual pink blotches blinking at awkward points on the walls all around.

Was I a ghost?

Had I just been vapourised?

I sent out the command SHIFT BACK and the floating body obeyed, showing me the room I'd just left and the form of myself leaning against the orb pillar, face blank, arms limp

Was that dead?

Had I-...

Another command RETURN TO BODY and a blast of wind carried me back in, arms flailing, almost knocking over the orb as I got used to having substance again.

Wah...

Spluttered breath.

Gravity.

A sense of...touch...abstract and physical...

Not dead then.

De-phased?

+++

After a few tentative trips down the same corridor, I gradually built up enough courage to send out bolder commands

TURN LEFT

GO THROUGH WALL

FOLLOW VOICES

and the last one took me about five corridors over to Reshmi scratching grey residue off a light panel, shouting down at Juana to stop staring at the fucking

conduit and get outside onto the Viewing Platform or the chessboard would start to erode.

I hung back a second, instinctively, but a second instinct deeper down commanded me right up to Reshmi's shoulder.

Somehow, she didn't notice anything, didn't hear my breathing.

Invisibility cloak?

Seemed like it.

Or was she just pretending?

I had no way to answer that, though I did have the feeling that her acting could never be this good, this sustained, so I continued hovering behind as she picked Juana up by the arm, rode out the spasm claw attacks, and guided the whining Yaqui-Mexican down several corridors and outside to where...for some reason, probably psychopathic whimsy...the dead djinn had, for the third time, been re-installed.

Kuso...his skin was starting to flake...

Their skin.

With dried green fluid that had to be the demon's blood.

Wah, better not to look.

But it was tough, they were right there, a few yards from the chessboard, dulling the ice-scape in the near distance.

'Are you conscious?' Reshmi asked, making me jump a bit as she was looking directly at my face.

'Don't wanna play chess,' replied Juana, flicking over one of the rooks.

'Then just sit there and watch. I'll use two oppositional styles, make it interesting. And if you change your mind, just whine, I'll tag you in.'

'The conduit...wanna go back.'

'Gods...'

'It's soothing.'

'Yes, by design, and no...you can't. Wah, how could such a weak poet do this much damage to a mesmerizing ancient-...'

‘I’m going back.’

Juana got up as she spoke out the words, walking straight through my left shoulder.

‘Kuso...’ I said, more wind than sound.

The Yaqui stopped, perhaps hearing me, or perhaps not as she turned and stared off at the ice fields, a plume erupting not too far off that was way more stark than my muffled *kuso*.

‘The conduit is now off limits,’ barked Reshmi, clutching the king by its cross. ‘Go back there and you’ll find the panel closed and sealed.’

‘Panels are soothing...’

‘Don’t be pedantic, panels are panels. Now, if you really don’t want to play chess with me...which is a bit insulting, actually, but...if you really want to do something else, why not sit in the lobby for a while, talk to one of the holograms?’

‘*Quizza...*’

‘Good, then I suggest the Thai one. She is programmed to be sexually aggressive and cold afterwards. And is completely untethered from human culture, past and present.’

‘Untethered...’

‘Much better than the archive types. Even your precious Varo.’

Juana stooped down, picked up some moon dust, attempted to crush the already crushed.

I floated nearby, sucking some of it towards my leg.

Magnetics?

Didn’t matter, it was only dust.

Nothing harmful.

‘If you really want to get past this...state,’ Reshmi continued, still talking to Juana’s back, ‘my offer is still open.’

‘No.’

‘You know she deserves it...’

‘No.’

‘...for how she treated you.’

Juana half-turned, switching to the dead djinn. As did I. We stared, both of us, long enough for a new patch of skin to flake off the poor thing’s neck.

‘Fetch her,’ muttered Juana, picking up more dust.

‘Are you-...’

‘No, don’t.’

‘Wait, you can’t just-...’

‘Leave her alone. Stop asking me. *Solo quiero un poco de paz.*’

The Yaqui stood up and threw the dust out towards the containment shield, at the dead djinn, and marched off towards the base as the dust blew back into my non-physical face.

I blinked as if it were real

Then coughed.

Looked at Reshmi with the king piece still gripped in hand.

Waited for her to mumble something

then wished I hadn’t

as she said, full volume, no restraint, ‘kill all the wretches.’

+++

Back in the lobby, in my own physical body, I sat rigid on the couch next to Lexi and watched her go over her notes.

I thought about telling her about the pink orb, I truly did, but I just couldn’t seem to get the words out.

And then I thought, if she knows, she’ll use it too.

Spy on me when I’m alone.

And I’ll never know when.

Permanent observation, forever.

As long as we're on this base.

Which could be forever.

Or the end of the night if Reshmi unraveled enough.

'Don't know if learning in block phrases is actually that good of an idea...' said Lexi, staring off into a random patch of lobby air, 'or is it a good idea? Maybe I'm overthinking...'

'Yeah,' I replied, looking at the lines on my palm. 'Wonder where Reshmi is now.'

'But if I just do single words then...I can't get the blending...when the other guy talks.'

'Probably not in the kitchen zone.'

'It was just...like a blur train...he doesn't slow down at all.'

'Maybe reading my notes again. Or thinking up new ways to shove *Moon Prison* down my throat. Gods, I don't even know why...just can't seem to finish the thing.'

'The movie topic was okay though...I understood about a third of that...I think.'

'Fifteen more pages and...nope, can't do it.'

'Ah, maybe if I get him to-...'

Lexi stopped, and a second later my brain picked up on it and stopped too.

I followed her Argento face and exterior screams to the couch near the main exit, muttering, 'kuso,' when I saw Juana's jaw attached to the Thai hologram's scalp, and then a more formulaic, 'wah,' when Assta materialised out of nothing and put a long finger against the feral Yaqui's head.

Juana dropped instantly, rolling off the couch and onto the padded lobby floor.

'Was that...?' Lexi started, half-rising as Assta bent down.

'Emergency KO...'

'*Foda.*'

'...I hope.'

Sensing the two faces gawping at her, Assta raised her left hand and said, in an unusually soft voice, 'go back to your activities, she is not dead.'

Neither of us said anything back.

In case we got zapped too.

That's was my reasoning anyway.

Probably Lexi's too, if she still had a survival instinct.

But then I leaned back into the couch, watched Assta stroke Juana's hair, watched her ignore the moaning of the bleeding Thai hologram, and thought, she really is quite alert, quite useful, quite nurse-like

quite pretty too

in a base authority kind of way.

Maybe I should put her in my book?

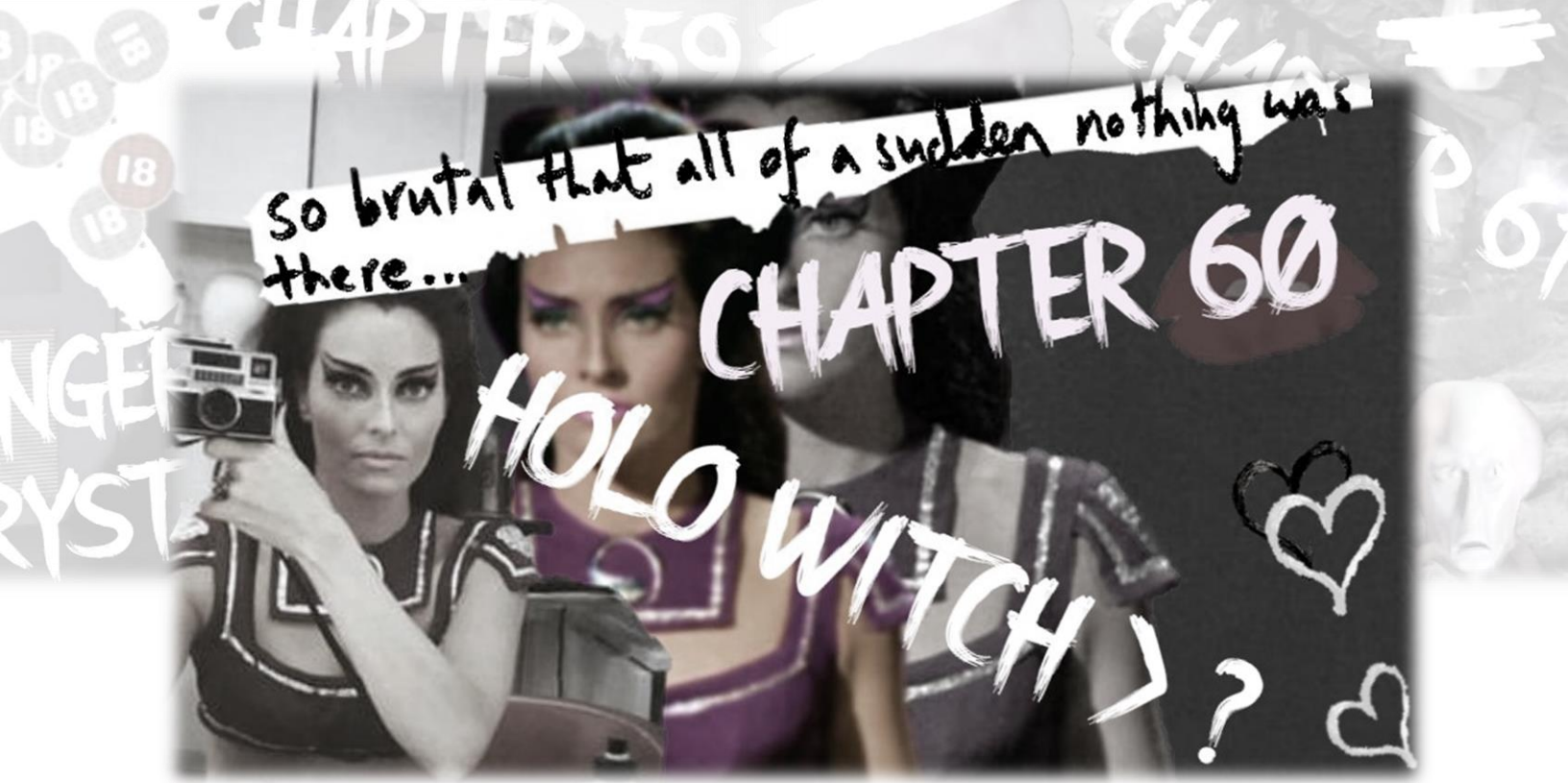
'Something really off about her...' whispered Lexi, eyes on her Portuguese notes.

'Yeah...'

'If she does anything to Juana...'

I nodded in place of another *yeah*, picking up *Moon Prison* and keeping Assta in background micro-frame as I pretended to read, finally adding a soft, 'she won't,' when I realized that Lexi was still looking at me.

'Better not.'



The door was locked
for Lexi
but for me it was a shower curtain, lighter than that, and
with assurances from Assta as backdrop
[‘she’s in recovery, needs time alone’]
I drifted through and
there was no need to scan the room as there she was, the crazed Yaqui ex-
cannibal who’d just tried to feed on a hologram, down to knickers and one of Lexi’s
old *Tenebrae* tops, running claws along the circumference of a pale white orb,
costumed probably by Assta with a blonde wig and poorly-drawn lips and
I didn’t wanna see this
yet I must’ve on some level as I wasn’t moving
but then I was moving
sucked slowly back by a cartoon magnet in the corridor outside
until I was in that corridor
magnet AWOL

watching Lexi march off round the corner and Assta resort to her usual stunt
[dematerialization]

but checking a panel on the wall before she did so and then glancing up towards
me, either recognition or precognition or

nothing

her eyes were back down on the floor

fading into base molecules

atoms

up quarks muons

beyond.

+++

In theory

theoretically

I could've spent hours wraith-patrolling the base, but part of me always had the nagging sense in the back of my psyche...brain...Id...that Reshmi or Assta were somehow aware of what I was doing, had turned on the resonator specifically to test my limits. Other parts, perhaps a naïve, Scouse segment, said it was fine, that to Reshmi and Assta it would've been normal, they could also appear and disappear at will, observe anything anytime any place, yet...still the nagging part.

It couldn't have been switched on by accident.

A machine that grants covert freedom.

A pervert's dream.

On a base with the alien who'd previously evaporated my sex drive.

Who'd allowed me to almost get eaten by Juana.

The more I thought about it, the more I stayed hovering in the resonator room, staring at the glowing pink vibrations.

What about beyond the base, the containment field?

Should I try that?

Go there at least once, see what happens?

The pinkness said *yes*.

My Id said *yes*.

The dark shadow that could've been Reshmi with the lights off said *what are you waiting for, dude, go now, glide, flee, explore something*.

But should I?

+++

Back in the lobby [again], in normal physical form, I sat slumped on the usual stool, digging a wooden fork into mush that Reshmi claimed was muesli [I'd asked for a spoon and been told that that was boring].

Didn't know where Lexi was.

When she'd be back.

And Reshmi didn't seem to care much as she was busy reeling off a list of places we were gonna visit asap, most of them dwarf planets I'd vaguely heard of, as well as a quick dip down into the nearby atmosphere of Neptune.

'Isn't there diamond rain down there?' I asked, scooping up muesli and watching it drip through the gaps in the fork.

'A very human question, laced with terror.'

'Just wondering...'

'Hmm. No *err* noise. That's progress, I suppose. Yes, Keni, there is diamond rain, sporadically, but in the tech we have at our disposal that won't be a problem. Nothing will. Ah wait, I forgot a place...Sedna. Very far out but...no, we have to, it's incredible. Has the remnants of a crash site...some old ones I can't remember the name of...Zabbi something...ancient types infamous for cruising around the galaxy, boasting to other races about how superior they were...even when they came across a Type II. Unbelievable arrogance...no wonder they died out. But the crash site, the

state they left their ship in...' Reshmi broke off, raising her *Triton's Best Mum* cup to toast the sudden materialization of Assta nearby. 'Assta-tron...I was just telling Keni about the crash site on Sedna. What was the name of that race again?'

'Zavva Bō.'

'That's it...Zavva Bō...I wanna add that to the itinerary...the Sedna trip. Make the corrections, will you?'

'Leisure trips are not possible at this moment.'

'Sorry?'

'Base power is insufficient for the necessary energy transfer. Three of the eight pod batteries are leaking. Your Mexican guest is mentally unstable. Your other guests...seem uninterested in sightseeing.'

'I didn't ask for a list of complaints, I'm telling you, prepare for the trip. We're leaving before the end of the week.'

'No. That is beyond current base limits.'

'What?'

'The trip that you are planning is beyond the current energy limits of this base. It has been postponed. No appeals granted.'

'... ..'

I tensed up, eyes on Reshmi's cup, brain saying that would be the most likely threat.

And it was.

The whole thing, plus coffee inside, flying out of her hand and through Assta's face, who merely flickered in response, repeating that out-directional trips were currently beyond base limits and no appeals would be accepted.

'Fucking holo-witch fuck rigid little-...'

'However, in-directional trips via muon transfer can be permitted.'

'Fucking Urf hand-me-downs...'

'It is your choice.'

Reshmi grabbed my fork and held it up to use as the vanguard of her second assault...then lowered it again, dropped it on the counter. Looked out at the ice-fields. Muttered, 'gonna stare at plasma for a bit,' then got up and stalked off towards the Alienology Wing.

I watched her go, drifting past the Thai hologram with her Jung book [and seemingly no memory of Juana's attack], the blue-skinned guy who was allegedly a Kontolian, the Kenyan Anarchist, the Tanzanian Completist [according to Reshmi, a neo-type of imperialist nationalism advocated by those from the inner system, who came out to the Kuiper Belt to proselytise and moan about colony shit while indulging heavily in said colony shit], the Ceres entrepreneur, the talking koala, the bowl of muesli without a fork, and then, finally, to Assta and her blankly sociopathic face.

In my head: ask her about the resonator. Tell her what I've been up to, see if she's aware of it.

But in another part...a trace feeling...filtered in during the wraith trips.

'Do you ever get tired of this?'

The tall, aureolin hologram tilted their head, focusing on the discarded fork.

'Or bored?'

'Fatigue is not applicable to my system.'

'Yeah...not physical, I mean...do you get bored mentally, of doing all this?'

Taking care of the base, Reshmi...maintaining everything.'

'No,' she replied, left side of her face buffering.

'Not even a little bit?'

'No.'

'It's beyond your limits?'

Their eyes shifted from the fork to my neck, hopefully not linking the two.

'What I mean is...do you want anything? Is there a desire...or feeling...in your system for-...'

'Maintain base operations.'

‘Huh? That’s what you want?’

‘Yes.’

‘Anything else?’

‘No.’

‘Companionship? Friends?’

‘That is a human concept, it does not apply to my type.’

I picked up the fork and prodded it into the muesli, no intention of eating anything. There were follow up lines swirling, some rational, some depraved, but I’d already asked about a hundred questions and I didn’t want her...*them*...to feel like this was an interrogation.

Because of the resonator, the fact that they might know?

Human decency?

I didn’t know so I settled on neither, turning my grey-Hegel face into the smile of a social worker and asking instead if they wanted to go outside, have a game of UNO or chess or something.

‘Those are human games.’

‘Okay, then how about something you know? Or we could just sit and talk? I mean, we’re probably gonna be together here for quite a-...’

My line died out on the trail of Assta’s disintegrating molecules...or light particles...as they beamed away to somewhere that clearly wasn’t the lobby.

Unless they were hiding behind one of the couches?

I could get up and check, but then

what if they were?

Would they do anything?

I dropped the fork into the muesli, let it sink.

Watched the final bubbles.

Questioned the bubbles.

Was this really muesli?

Constructed from what?

I pulled back images and scenes of *Void Galaxia*, *Trek*, *Beyond The Rabbit Hole*, all the space media that didn't talk down, patronise, and went through the replicator tech, and thought, it's related to the re-organisation of matter, on some level, kind of like what Deleuze was saying but intentional, an active human force insisting that something become another thing and

matter from where?

Could you really make food that way?

Didn't the atoms need to be different?

Could a table become chicken?

I dipped my hand into the muesli, telling myself it was a table, pulled out the fork and stared at it.

Was Assta made of this too?

Their whole form?

And why wouldn't they want something...beyond this?

They had emotions, they'd beamed away when I pushed them on it. They didn't wipe their own memory like they did with the Thai woman over there. The Thai hologram. Pretending to read Jung. Nodding at it.

Wasn't Jung overtly spiritual?

Friend of the occult?

If she really was reading him, taking in his words then ultimately she'd have to...do something. Kill herself. Demand to be something other than light.

I wiped the fork, placed it back on the counter.

Got up and pushed in my stool.

Walked past the Thai psychology fan and the other holograms and headed into the corridor that would lead me to the resonator.

Stopped at the first corner.

Stared at a pale green panel.

Wondered how exactly it opened.

There were no indents, no edges to grip onto.

De-materialisation?

Maybe.

I moved again, counting off more panels, imagining all the plasma conduits embedded within the walls, carrying energy to the rest of the base, working beyond my comprehension, flowing cos Assta made it so.

Did I have to understand any of this?

Nope.

I had a basic understanding.

Trek had taught me.

All the space shows had.

Reshmi to a degree...my Japanese side...

I stopped, reading the alien text on the door to the resonator room.

Waved a hand and opened it.

This is not a crime.

The door wasn't locked, the machine is turned on.

Machine is a friend, ally.

For me and the Ondōans.

But not Bit the Engineer.

She'd been against them from the start cos they weren't her machines.

Weren't machines she understood.

I didn't either.

Did that matter?

Reshmi didn't understand them.

The resonator phased into a darker pink, forcing me to retreat a few steps.

I kept going, back out into the corridor.

Maybe later.

When it was bright pink again.

The panel closest to me agreed, didn't object, so I walked on through the Alienology Wing, past the forbidden doors [which I had been unable to commit to

floating into] and kept going until I was seated in the archive room, *Passwords // Baudrillard* open on my lap, reading out lines I could get behind, cannibalise in some way.

Cannibalise or tangibilise.

Actualise.

The end can no longer be located.

We shall never reach the end, we are already beyond it.

The end intercepts, in a sexless way.

Losing the memory of the end, the projection of the end and the possibility of integrating that end into a present action.

Our end is indeed inventing a virtual double for itself.

I paused, for some reason thinking of Assta...Holo-witch as Reshmi had called them...in her little sulk...holding up a glove of syringe fingers, each one filled with a different pastel colour.

A passion to kill/torment.

To be base warden.

Was that Assta, the real one?

I turned a page, then another, then another, then another, then about seven.

The object is taking its revenge.

But she wasn't an object.

They weren't an object.

Were they?

Far as I could remember from unii the object was only vengeful in the sense that the virtual...hyperreal...had allowed it to become so, and at its core, it was deeply uninterested in revenge.

That was a human concept.

Objects were subjects until they were objects again. And if they were subjects, why not progressive ones?

Couldn't Assta be nice, at her core?

Their core?

I closed the book and stared at the keyboard on the cover for a while, pulling *object* in seventeen different [violent] ways, putting pathos and bathos and eros into an insert image of Assta's brain.

Then bit my tongue and switched to Deleuze.

*Either it is **the fold** of the infinite, or the constant **folds** [replis] of finitude which curve the outside and constitute the inside.*

Fold of the infinite...

Curve the outside...

I closed my eyes, willing the skeleton of Deleuze to Triton to defend this shit.

What folds?

Where?

+++

'You, too, can feel the joy and happiness of hating.'

I laughed at the line, putting a hand back on the bed-board and turning to see if Lexi was laughing too.

Turned out she wasn't even watching.

Just head down, stroking her found-god-knows-where *Xxun the Neutrino Alchemist* t-shirt, sucking in the new Yaqui language book Assta had created. Which was soon to be supplemented by a Yaqui-speaking hologram in the lobby.

'Making any progress?'

'Yeah, if you want.'

'Huh?'

She glanced up, first at me, then at Barbara Steele glowering from within the coffin. 'What did you say?'

'I asked if you were making any progress.'

‘Oh. You mean this? Yeah, I think I’ve got the basics. Don’t know how to pronounce any of it though.’

‘Long as you don’t get mixed up with all that Portuguese...’

‘Hopefully the hologram will be ready by tomorrow. Then I can surprise Juana with a few lines...when she gets out from recovery.’

‘Yeah.’

‘If she’s able to talk. Or in the mood. I don’t know...Assta doesn’t say very much about...the details...what’s actually wrong with her.’

‘That’s weird.’

‘Just something about psyche-contradiction...hating the closest thing that resembles herself...probably cos of Sadia.’

‘That’s what she said?’

‘But then...why wouldn’t she attack something that looks like her?’

‘Sadia?’

‘The abuser, yeah. Why not attack the source of...I don’t know...where the hate is coming from.’

‘The joy and happiness of hating,’ I muttered, pushing off the mattress and heading to the door.

‘You’re gonna write again?’

‘That or stare at the notepad.’ I looked at the screen, following the blank hero through the secret passage behind the fireplace. ‘I’ll be back in a bit. You don’t need to pause the filmn.’

‘If you see Assta, ask her if the hologram’s ready yet.’

‘Okay.’

‘But don’t be pushy. She might get annoyed...and then end up not doing it.’

‘*Comprendo.*’

+++

Writing may have been existent in some corner slum of my brain, but it wasn't a driver. And the resonator was the brightest shade of pink when I passed by again. Calling me in to check out what Juana was up to. And maybe drift out past the containment shield. Or into a sub-space realm where the ghost of Deleuze could explain in very simple English where all these supposed folds were.

There were many insanities to pursue, I thought, butchering a Kathy Acker line.

What I thought was her line.

Or maybe it was Deleuze too.

Baudrillard?

Bored Real Hard?

Kristeva Kristevvvvvvesson?

Object is beyond abject and subject is object and

I had no idea what I was saying...thinking...possibly a side effect of the wraith-drifting I'd been doing three times a day...that I was doing right at that moment...floating at head height, mostly sticking to the corridor limits, letting out a feeble *wah* when I turned the corner and saw Assta and Reshmi parked outside Juana's room, the hologram holding up a giant syringe [filled with pale green fluid] like it was an ancient Sumerian shield.

I drifted closer, lifting my ghost form up to the ceiling, listening in on Assta sounding like an actual, wretched Holo-Witch as she told Reshmi that the Yaqui was broken and, in order to maintain base operations, would have to be expunged.

'Vetoed,' replied Reshmi, curt as a cartoon judge.

'It is necessary. The boy will have to be removed too, he is far too inquisitive.'

'Keni?'

'Death or repatriation. Or repatriation then death. Made to resemble an accident.'

Reshmi put a hand on the needle, wrapping around until her fingers touched. 'Wah...he's been asking you something personal, hasn't he? Probably after I left earlier.'

‘That is irrelevant.’

‘He didn’t try to fuck you, did he?’

‘The girl can go too. She will not want to be here after the Yaqui is extricated.’

‘Nah, he wouldn’t go that far...not yet.’

‘These actions are necessary for base maintenance. All three guests must be purged as soon as viable.’

‘Because they irritate you? Cos you like the boy?’

‘I will do it via auxiliary feed if necessary.’

‘Auxiliary feed...really...’

‘If support is not given.’

‘...and I’m supposed to be the child? *Kuso*. You truly are the most rigid fucking-...’ Reshmi ran her hand up the needle, releasing wisps of purple vapour which rose up and blended with my own particles...vapour...whatever I was in this form.

‘You’re not touching any of them. They’re all staying.’

‘You are not listening well. The Yaqui will unravel within weeks...the boy asks too many questions, the girl-...’

‘Yeah, you’ve said all that. But I have a plan. Specifically for the Yaqui.’

Assta tilted her head, this time left, and shifted the giant syringe to her other hand. ‘Mind slither is not-...’

‘Don’t have to tilt your head, I’m not gonna do anything outrageous. Just me and Juana...taking a short trip back to Urf...visiting some troublesome blonde signifiers.’

‘What precisely is your plan?’

‘Ha, I think you could take a pretty safe guess.’ Reshmi stretched an arm out, tapping the needle. ‘Now...put this thing away and go make that Yaqui hologram for Lexi. And maybe change into something a bit more alluring...for your future love toy.’

‘You are too casual about this issue.’

‘That dress you wore for Itō Noe...when you wanted to drop her into Neptune... remember?’

Reshmi tilted her own head and smiled, waving at the disintegrating particles of Assta, then muttered something in native alien as she walked right to the end of the corridor and vanished round the side.

Still taking in what I’d just overheard, I drifted the opposite way, conjuring up defences for an imaginary trial, then bare phrases and blank-but-polite facial expressions I could use to show a complete lack of interest in Assta whenever she materialised in front of me, and then, in a self-sabotaging U-turn, lines to get to the root of her, to have her cosy and relaxed on the bed, sandwiched between me and Lexi, half malnourished dog rescued from bad owner, half siren that I wanted to smother in my arms and fuck the cunt off when Lexi wasn’t in the mood.

Fuck the cunt off?

That wasn’t-

I blinked, the sign in alien text that I knew said *FORBIDDEN* appearing object-real in front of me.

It wasn’t a fuck that I wanted.

Not in the conscious part of my-

Abandoning the thought...and image of Assta without nipples and pubic hair...I drifted through the construct ahead and felt an abrupt spasm of isolation...alienness...as green fog hovered around my own hazy form, denser at the fringes and then separating in two as I moved to the far side of the room, where there was a giant transparent tube, from floor to ceiling, holding the form of what looked like a bluish-grey curly-wurly chocolate bar, with strip-like tentacles stretched out in a dozen different places, possibly limbs, and two vertical slits near the middle that may or may not have been eyes.

My gut said eyes.

Definitely eyes.

But dead...empty.

Taking the idea of a breath, I floated close enough to reach out a stream of hand particles and was about to touch the mangled alien thing when everything turned pure green
pure fog
and when the particles cleared I was back in my own body again, could feel my own breaths, limb movements, veins and bones and
it wasn't the alien curly wurly anymore, it was the resonator
a dull grey colour
being patted by the hand of a grinning Reshmi [back in her Colombia Football top].

'No more snooping, Keni cat.'

'You...'

'...did this? Of course, for your writing, dumbbell. Give you a bit of inspiration...the chance to see things from an outside perspective. Little did I know you'd start living in the thing, spying on matters you shouldn't.'

'I wasn't-...' I paused, bringing back the last hour or so. 'Wait, you knew I was watching...just now...outside Juana's room?'

'Do I really need to state the obvious?'

'*Kuso*. That whole-...all of it. Assta knew too?'

The fake Indian patted the resonator on its orb head, then gripped my jacket sleeve and led me back out into the corridor.

'Are you going to tell Lexi?'

'Don't come back to this room again. There will be nothing here for you.'

'Are you going to tell Lexi?' I repeated, taking back my sleeve.

'*Boa noite*, Keni cat.'

'Yes or no?'

She may as well as have been *The Fold* in human form cos there was no answer, not even the hint of one, and when she'd gone, I called her *The Fold* out loud, then turned back to the resonator room and saw that the orb had gone too.

Kuso...

Probably for the best.

I felt sick.

Didn't like spying on people anyway.

Depressingly solid.

Maybe I should do some writing.

Packed with inevitable death.

Go see Lexi.

Pinned to...

Watch *Nightmare Castle*, forget about all-

...*this*.



Hello?

‘If you are attempting telepathy, comrade, please stop. My sensors are not equipped to detect that wavelength.’

Ah To nodded, then did a lap around the orb, trying to discover where its voice was coming from.

‘Are you...’ he started to say, but had no idea how to finish his sentence.

‘I am Krr-drrd, originally from the planet Ken. My biology is starkly different from yours. I have the ability to hover in mid-air. Do not be afraid.’

‘I’m not afraid...’

‘Then the Tier-1 acclimation period is complete. Please follow the purple line to the interview room.’

+

By all accounts directions dregs pinned up inside my head, it was LOBBY, only now it had a white coated Christmas tree over by the couches, each hologram sitting there in a green Santa hat, same colour cocktail in hand.

‘Wait a sec...’ I said, holding Lexi back by the sleeve as she tried to move over to the new decoration, then letting go when Assta materialised to the side, top half covered in my *Damijana Chu* hoodie.

‘As you can observe, the scenery has been altered slightly,’ the holo-caretaker announced.

‘Yeah...very festive.’

‘Of course, Christmas is not typically celebrated on this base, or in the human month of May, but the festival itself has redemptive qualities. As does the human artist’s impression of the Ondōan wormhole on the wall over there.’

‘Ah...’ I said, pivoting right and seeing that the white death spirals had been replaced by a pretty decent series of frames from *Beyond The Rabbit Hole*. Tsukubashi would’ve been proud. If he’d been sober enough. If he hadn’t already-

‘What is your instinct response-feeling?’

‘Err...’

‘Positive? Neutral plus?’

I turned back to Assta, trying not to react to the smiling Terminator face planted on top of my own hoodie. ‘Not bad. Colourful.’

‘The primary function of the change was to maintain base harmony, and emotional output is a subdivision of that.’

‘Is Juana free yet?’ interjected Lexi, standing over by the tree.

Assta pulled down both sleeves of the hoodie - that I’d finally decided couldn’t actually be mine as it wouldn’t be able to disintegrate and come back again - and glided over to an opposing branch. ‘Both Reshmi and Juana have gone on a temporary trip.’

‘Trip? Where?’

‘Earth.’

‘Without us?’

‘You are not necessary for the recovery process. In fact, your presence there would undoubtedly prove to be disruptive.’

‘I’m literally her closest friend,’ protested Lexi, flicking at one of the branches.

‘Do not be deflated. They will be back within a day or two. Please, sit down.

Absorb the new atmosphere in the lobby.’

‘Maintain base harmony?’ I asked, risking quarter of a smile.

‘Attempt some reflex zaum. Stare out at the ice-fields. Think of home. Settle.’

‘Home...right.’

+++

Ah To settled back into his new chair, which was much the same as the old one, only with slightly colder metal on the arms. He examined the blue tone of his hands, the blue sheen spread over the table and, finally, the almost imperceptibly light blue shading of the ice outside. It was a little odd, and, if he hadn’t already gone through the transitioning process, would’ve been disconcerting too. As if the whole place were just a green screen projection for a movie set on Pluto, or some other dwarf planet out in the Kuiper Belt. So detailed it had to be real yet, at the same time, so spectacularly alien that it couldn’t possibly be.

You should be careful

Sorry?

My sensors tell me you’re steering into the void zone, the dark trail between your old self and the Bavan over-layer

I’m just looking outside

Better to focus on your comrades at the table. More tangible, closer proximity, friendly enough to reach over and touch, stroke even

Window is fine.

+++

'You gave her your top?' asked Lexi later, back in our room, one of the *Phantasm* sequels playing in the background.

'Obviously it's not mine.'

'So she's wearing a copy?'

'I don't know. Probably.'

'Or she created one out of nothing. A hologram who could come up with anything and she makes...your weird sci-fi hoodie.'

I stared at the screen, half thinking about the flying death sphere, five eighths planning what to do with Ah To in the next chapter of *Yellow Muon Blob* [one fifteenth stuck on sucking off the Tall Man to save an already dead Jody].

'Is she trying to woo you?'

'Huh?'

'Don't pretend you're not listening. The holo-witch...is she attracted to you?'

A shriek on screen, the Tall Man revived, Reggie plugging in the acid. 'Where'd you hear that name?'

'She is, isn't she?'

'No, she's-...*they're* a hologram. They don't have a sex drive...far as I know. And they don't even want-...' I stopped, playing out the rest of my sentence internally and realizing it was trouble.

Tell her that part and I'd have to explain the resonator.

Which was unexplainable.

Especially now it'd been vanquished. Wiped off the face of the base.

'Are you glitching?'

I pointed at the screen, the teen tearaway in the hearse. 'This is a good bit.'

'Wah, she is chasing you. And you want her to.'

'Lexi...'

'Denial is the first sign of truth.'

I opened my mouth to say *Lexi* again, and...thought about her line...pictured a Mark simulacrum ranting about how impossible it was to respond to...but that didn't

matter as now she was smiling, crawling over onto my lap, leaning into my neck and whispering, ‘actually, kinda had my eye on the yukata guy.’

‘The yu-...’

‘His Japanese is quite good...tangible. And he’s always there, sitting on the same couch, receptive. Doesn’t run off to write sci-fi serials all the time.’

I pushed back up to the pillow, and said nothing as she peeled off the *Tenebrae* top.

In my head, two insanities:

One, this should be a scene in *Yellow Muon Blob*.

Two, I want Assta to watch.

And then a wildcard third.

Lexi is the Tall Man, after my brain.

And a fourth...

+++

Ah To opened his eyes to a faint humming sound.

Straight away, he guessed it was SUN Room 7 as the walls were mostly non-descript and there was a nebulous cloud of dark amber hovering directly in front of him. Plus, he only knew about five other rooms total, one of which was his own quarters. And this wasn’t that. Yup, definitely the SUN Room. 7th Iteration.

For once, he was correct.

‘The patient has self-revived,’ said Dr. Ssssssst, flashing four distinct patches of lighter orange on its right side.

‘Wah, that was quick. Must be getting used to the stun-field.’

+++

The final stretch of *Phantasm II* was a lot less dream-like than the other parts and, to me, a lot less interesting.

To Lexi too, apparently, as she detached from the bed, pulled the *Tenebrae* top back on, grabbed my *Damijana Chu* hoodie, aired it out a bit, and then turned to say she was going for a little walk.

‘Archives?’

‘Back in a bit.’

‘Lobby?’

I waited out a few seconds to see if the door would slide open again, but it didn’t, she was gone, hopefully not to try and short-circuit Assta...a joke thought, phased in and right back out again...but maybe that was what she was planning to do, I had no idea.

Was she jealous?

Did Assta like me in some weird, abstract way?

I wanted *no* and *yes* in that order, and then *no* and *no*, and then *keuso*, I didn’t want anything, just time and space to enjoy the base for a while, write a novel around it, maybe, if I could maintain the energy of the last few days, and

Lexi

I wanted Lexi

to ask about it just once, to show some kind of interest like I did with her language exchanges.

Cos I did do that.

Didn’t I?

I sat up on the bed and played back the last half day of conversation, then shifted off the bed completely and played back a little more.

Then stared down at the Yaqui textbook on the chair.

A piercing *whoosh* sound of the death sphere in the background.

Huh?

I turned, confused at the reappearance of a slightly older Tall Man.

Then recognized it as *Phantasm III*.

Sat down on the bed and watched the rest of the scene.

Laughed as I remembered one of Lexi's lines.

'The granddad guy looks arthritic...he's really the villain?'

Yeah.

Not the most fluid mover.

But effective when he says *BOY*.

I laughed again, ambushed by some of her other lines, put my arms back on the mattress, pictured our earlier fuck, got hard again, continued watching the film. The lack of extras in the background. The overturned car in each deserted town. The endless mausoleums. The aridity of-

+++

The door was wide open when Ah To finally got the courage to go back to his room and, as he poked his head round the side, he discovered not another intruder, nor a bragging Nabian, but his sometime anchor, Arista, standing next to his bed, flicking ash from the half-burnt, dark green stick in her left hand onto the stretched out [and possibly ironed] Slazenger jacket.

'Ah, the legend returns,' she said, half glancing over and then flicking more ash.

'I was just about to give up.'

+++

Feeling light free irritated mischievous, Lexi shunned the other holograms and pulled out a stool by the window.

For one hundredth of a millisecond, she saw the street outside her LA apartment, the two Mongolian girls smoking by the car, backstabbing her openly, to

any neighbour with ears, but that hole was filled with one blink, one concentrated thought about Assta's face when she saw Mark's own hoodie staring back at her.

The real hoodie, not a trick of light.

Not a-...

She paused, hearing the electric ~~fizzzzzz~~ of evolving particles close by, followed by a wide-rimmed glass of blue liquid on the counter by her elbow.

'Blueberry and vodka?'

'That is not your top,' replied Assta, craning their head round to get a better look at Lexi's chest. 'Why are you wearing it?'

'Intimacy.'

'What?'

'Mark wanted me to wear it...to keep warm.'

'A direct command?'

Lexi laughed, she couldn't help it, then picked up the glass and walked over to the couch with the new Yaqui lady. Feeling a little bit of guilt on the way, she paused and shouted back at Assta [not too loud], 'thanks for the drink.'

Then sat down and pretended to listen to the exchange.

Was she really jealous of a hologram?

Fuck Mark, he didn't deserve this level of... *this*.

Should've burnt the hoodie not worn it.

Assta wasn't so bad.

She didn't really like Mark, he'd just talked to her, shown basic interest.

Anyone could get in her holo knickers, if that's all it took.

Their holo-knickers.

Even herself.

Brain willing.

Not that she really wanted to seduce a-

'... ..?' asked the Yaqui lady who didn't look a thing like Juana, didn't have the same colour skin, the same lunatic jolt in the eyes.

‘Sorry, my mind’s a bit wavy...’

‘... ..?’

Lexi apologized a second time and got up, leaving the drink where it was and going over to the white Christmas tree.

Another week, and we’ll be gone.

When Juana’s better.

And Mark’s bored of this place.

We’ll get Reshmi to take us back and-...

‘I have constructed another drink for you,’ said Assta, the smoke from the new glass occluding parts of the hologram’s blank face.

‘*Obrigada*...but I still have the other one.’

‘It is not in your hand.’

‘I’m not that thirsty.’

‘Then I’ll put it down here until you are.’ Assta bent down to the low-level wooden table [faux-Japanese design] and put the drink that looked like a chemistry experiment next to the snowman astronaut decoration. ‘Are you hungry?’

‘No.’

‘Sleepy?’

‘Err...not really.’

The hologram caretaker stood back up and looked at the tree. Looked at it for two, three minutes. Pulling her hood up a bit, Lexi shifted over from the smoky drink and looked at it too.

They’re going to ask about Mark was a pretty insistent thought inside her head, replacing the previous thought of *foda, is that fire drink poisoned?*

‘Do you miss your home?’

Lexi broke out from the branches and looked up at Assta’s fringe. ‘Me?’

‘Is it in your thoughts from time to time? Your dreams?’

‘A bit...I guess. Not that much.’

‘Will you return there together with Mark?’

‘Err...possibly. I don’t know.’

‘Did he tell you that he would return with you...’

‘Him?’

‘...to Fresno?’

‘Yeah, sure. After a hundred years vegetating in this place.’

Assta tilted their head, running a fingernail down the face of *Damijana Chu*.

‘Would you consider your relationship to be a strong one?’

‘Wah...big tangent.’

‘A passionate one? No, not a tangent. Everything is accumulative.’

‘Hmm...and weirdly personal too. Maybe I should ask you some questions.

Balance things out a bit.’

‘Do you have sex often?’

Lexi laughed, accidentally knocking one of the tree decorations off the branch with her knee.

‘Some human studies say sex less than once a week indicates mauve regression into friendship, which tends to result in emerald separation.’

‘Fascinating...emerald?’

‘This may or may not apply to your case, but I have noticed that, as a couple, you share a lack of interest in each other’s activities. He does not ask about your language study, you do not ask about his book.’

‘Okay, this is really starting to get weird now...’ Lexi put the fallen decoration on the table, flicking some of the smoke from the glass away as it drifted over towards her face. ‘I’m gonna go back to my exchange.’

‘That is not possible at this moment.’

‘Sorry?’

Lexi half knew the answer, but turned anyway, just to confirm that the Yaqui lady wasn’t there anymore.

‘Her program is still error prone. Requires more fine-tuning.’

‘Okay. Then I guess I’ll go back to my room. Hang out with Mark for a bit.’

‘That is a correlative step. You can ask him about *Yellow Muon Blob*.’

‘Yeah, sure...what?’

‘He said previously that he has created a character based on me. And their arc is very interesting. But I have not seen it yet.’

Lexi folded her arms, unfolded them, flicked a nail at the tree.

Don't say it

Don't say it

Don't say it.

‘Actually, he did mention something about that. A really cold character called Holo-Witch who’s always trying to-...’ She stopped, survival blood kicking in as the hoodie on Assta started to flicker. ‘I forget what she does exactly. I’ll have to ask him later. Sorry, are you okay? Do you need to teleport somewhere?’

There was no verbal answer as Assta buffered into fragments, then quickly reformed into the version with the old base jumpsuit. Comic-blood red. Then remained frozen for a further ten, fifteen seconds as all the particles re-confirmed their positions.

‘Reboot?’ asked Lexi, tone wavering a little, eyes on the faraway exit.

Assta straightened up, gaining an extra inch, and reached out a hand towards Lexi’s waist. ‘I am stable now...’

‘Okay.’

‘...albeit a little constrained. Trapped, in human terms. Would you like to go outside together, take a walk?’

‘Sorry?’

‘Reshmi told me that you are fond of chess.’

‘Not really.’

Another flicker, Assta’s shoulder sharpening abruptly into a jagged spear, then rounding itself out even faster.

‘It is a slow game...that can assist in getting to know someone. I wish to get to know you better. Will you come outside with me?’

Lexi glanced down at the fire drink, then at the exit, then at a very serious-looking holographic face.

No, I'm tired.

Maybe next time.

Go play with the djinn, Holo-Witch.

Let's wait until Reshmi gets back, then play.

'Will you come outside with me?' repeated Assta, taking away their hand from Lexi's waist. 'For one game?'

'Err...'

'Together?'

+++

'What most of us realise is...simply...AH-Bots like the position they are in. Guaranteed work, a place to live, fair punishment regulations [in most factories]. What more could they want? A shack in one of the fringe systems, eating dust and ice, dealing with rogue AH-Bot psychopaths? No, that is not a productive life. And that's exactly how the more rational AH-Bots see it. If that weren't the case, why would the vast majority still be working down the mines?'

Ah To lowered the padd, ignoring the humming noise and thinking out a chain of invective. Then something more rational. A scene he remembered from one of those American slave films.

My master lets me play the violin.

But there was no answer to his thought. Cos the room was empty and the jacket was gone. On a mission to befriend a new Ah To.

+++

It was a dead end cul-de-sac

base without any clear rules, no consistency in the alien characters, the Assta and Lexi analogues veering wildly between states of kind and sociopathic, switching places at times, different hair, different heights, and I couldn't keep track of any of it even writing out notes didn't help just made me more confused looking at them.

And that fucking resonator...

I dropped the tool that was allegedly a self-sealing stem-bolt and stared at the space that used to have a glowing pink orb.

If Reshmi knew I was back in this room...

She'd do what?

Laugh at me?

Gloat?

Maybe she was doing that right now, in stealth mode. Maybe she hadn't gone anywhere with Juana. Maybe I should pick up the padd and start writing chapter eight of *Yellow Muon No-one Gives A Fuck*.

Except Assta...

She seemed oddly keen.

They seemed.

I stretched out an arm and put a fingertip on the padd. Then shifted back to *The Childlike Life Of The Black Tarantula*.

Started reading.

Felt ecstatic.

Exhausted.

Hateful.

Confused.

Put it down and tried Deleuze for the thirteenth time in two days.

Encompassed by the sky, the milieu in turn encompasses the collectivity. It is as representative of the collectivity that the hero becomes capable of an action which makes him equal to the milieu and re-establishes its accidentally or periodically endangered order: meditations of the community and of

the land are necessary in order to form a leader and render an individual capable of such a great action.

Milieu?

Milieu...

Mi-li-ew...

Didn't know why but somehow it felt related to this moon base...Triton...the milieu of what was going on around me.

I just couldn't figure out how.

Deleuze...

The guy was always like this.

Hypnotically uneasy.

The kind of annoying type who says *abstruse* instead of *weird*, as Lexi said.

Ah, Lexi...

Lexi-tron...

She'd probably be on the bed by now, watching another director's cut of Barbara Steele's muff getting poked.

Had to get back.

Wanted to get back.

I missed her.

A pale yellow hologram appeared in a white bikini, face pixelated. Untied the string at their back. Dissolved into nothingness as the cover fell.

The fuck was I doing?

I slapped *The Fold* / *Deleuze* on its nonsense blurb and pushed it away, forced myself up against the wall then walked off with haze recollections of Lexi in the WinterMute hostel, at Grape Fest, on the dungeon slab, in *Moon Factory 7*, watching a murder against her will and

re-entering our room

I saw the screen still frozen on the beginning of *Phantasm IV* and the bed empty and a complete lack of any note to explain why.

Ah, she's probably murdering Yaqui in the lobby, I told myself, lying down on the mattress, putting her pillow on top of mine. I should ask her about that when she gets back. Take my mind off the pointless sci-fi shit.

I clicked off pause, re-starting the filmn.

Or I should ask Assta how she made the Yaqui hologram, what the baseline data for it was, what resources she used to fill in the-

What resources *they* used to-

A knock at the door.

I raised a hand and shout-slurred, 'yeah?'

Then shifted the hand to cover my forehead as Assta glided in, wearing base pants and *Tenebrae* t-shirt, taking a seat on the side of the bed and, without any hesitation or permission *or* embarrassment, placing a hand on top of my thigh.

'Thought you would be Lexi...'

'How is my character progressing?'

'...though I guess she wouldn't knock. Sorry?'

'The Assta analogue in your novel. Are they developing well?'

'Oh that. Yeah. Not really. To be honest, I'm a bit stuck.'

'Writer's block?'

'Don't know where it's going. Or what it's supposed to...be going as.' I paused, eyes tracing a path around the edges of *Tenebrae*, the victim-woman's face. 'Maybe I need to do some research on structure, how to keep things...connected, ordered.'

'Art is beyond my limits.'

'Really?'

Assta moved their hand down to my knee, then back up again, gaining a little more ground. Tilted their neck at the floating sphere on screen. Muttered *strange head* at Reggie and his ponytail.

'I thought your program would've given you data on art...writing...all that kind of stuff.'

'This filmn seems odd.'

‘Huh?’

‘Perhaps it could help you.’

I looked over, letting out a small laugh as the Tall Man opened up the coffin and climbed into the red light. ‘Maybe...’

‘Lexi could also help you. I’m sure she has a sense of art.’

‘Yeah, if Barbara Steele’s in it.’

‘Perhaps when she returns here, you can ask her for advice.’

‘Don’t think she’ll be that interested. And I don’t wanna bore her anyway. She’s got her language study to think about...which is probably more useful than an amateur sci-fi novel written by a-...’

‘Yes, I saw her in the lobby. She was sitting very close to the Japanese hologram.’

‘Japanese?’

‘I do not know what they are doing now.’

‘It wasn’t the Yaqui woman you made?’

Assta moved their hand again, riding it up the side and onto my waist, then trailing a fingernail right across my stomach. ‘Do you find this mattress comfortable?’

‘Err...it’s okay. I suppose.’

‘I have never tried it before. But it does look comfortable.’

‘Don’t know...it’s-...’

Lay down here, try was right there on the diving board of my brain but I couldn’t let it drop. Instead, I rolled off the other side of the bed and took up an awkward position by the screen, that...*keuso*...was showing the motel scene, the demon woman pushing death-spheres out of her nipples.

Assta stared at the space on the mattress where my body had been.

Put a hand on the pillow.

Then slowly lowered herself down, turning slightly so she landed on her side.

She looked over at me, with moon eyes.

‘It is comfortable...’

what mistake?

I hadn't even said anything, just moved to block out the nudity on screen, the demon woman who she may have figured common ground with-

They may have pictured

They

They they they they they fuck's sake

Lexi you witch

Sneaky witch-a-tron

you better not be fucking that guy

after one fucking week

just cos we didn't talk much over the last few days

which was only down to the resonator and the weirdness of being on this base and staring at random panels, wondering how exactly the plasma conduits worked and if that alleged Neptune really was state-of-the-art VR and

the whole thing

blue abject lonely blank

something to be coped with in that way, positively and

wah

she wasn't fucking the hologram, wasn't even talking to him cos the couch was empty, deserted.

Abandoned by a witch looking to fuck?

Off-line?

I stopped, scanning the rest of the lobby.

No-one.

Not even Assta over by the Ondōan wormhole pics.

Did they go somewhere, Lexi and the Japanese hologram?

Outside?

Could the lobby holograms do that?

I walked over to her usual language exchange couch, checked behind and under and between the gaps in the cushions, then sat down where she normally sat.

No, they weren't outside.

Not the holograms.

Cos according to Reshmi, they never left the lobby.

But then...she hadn't said they couldn't.

Just that they didn't.

Would Lexi really take him somewhere?

Actually fuck a hologram?

I looked at the table and spotted her notes. Leaning in close, I saw that the first page was covered in what looked like Yaqui...definitely not Japanese...and when I flicked through the other pages underneath, there was no Japanese there either.

Huh?

It wasn't like her not to make notes.

And she'd said the Japanese hologram was annoying.

She wouldn't do anything.

I wouldn't do anything.

Assta was the Id side of my brain trying to derail me. Send me over to a more exciting track. With rails that would kill me. That would depress me as soon as the sun came up.

Wah, what was that?

I stood up, squinting at the window.

A flash of green?

I moved closer, picking up the snowman astronaut from the table, crouching a little when I got to the counter.

Must've been some rogue nitrogen plu-

A shot of green light sailed through the window, bursting one of the Christmas tree decorations over by the couches.

Kuso, kuso...

I dived down, under the counter, pulling the snowman astronaut up over my head.

Then the bulk of my jacket.

I expected some kind of wind suction from the cracked glass, but there was nothing.

No falling shards.

No base alarms.

What the-

'Assta...' I shouted, looking back across the lobby, begging for something to materialise.

Nothing did.

Not even audio.

Maybe she was outside, fighting off the green light thing?

The people firing the green light.

The aliens firing the green light.

The creatures, things...

Counting out a full minute, I muttered *right, Barry Lyndon*, took a soldier's breath and, with a slightly shaky hand, poked the snowman astronaut up over the top of the counter.

Held it there for another minute.

Breathed out in relief.

Okay, no more light attacks.

Must've been taken care of by base defences.

Pushing myself up, I peered out through the cracked hole in the window.

Or not.

In the near distance, possibly at the edge of the containment field, was a hazy mass of tentacled, pea-green alienology. Ah, those guys...Martokras...from *Pluto 2280*...the shit version. And the mass of green was moving...in a jarring, unnatural

way...shifting closer and closer to the base. Like an invading force of surrealists preparing to abstract the lobby...all lobby-affiliated things...including me.

Several thoughts costumed themselves in my head, some lunatic.

Get out there, fight.

Strip off your top, charge like a Viking, massacre.

Ask for directions, pretend to be lost.

Run to the resonator, hit it repeatedly until the pink glow appears.

Find Lexi, fuck her.

Hide inside the Christmas tree.

Find Assta, kiss her, fuck her, lick her ankles.

Explain the outline of *Yellow Muon Blob*.

Apologise for it.

Force it down her holo-throat while flicking at her holo-

Another green light flew past my head, followed by another twenty or so that tore down some of the panels on the nearby wall.

I scrambled back behind the couches, shrieking, 'Assta, Reshmi!'

But it was useless

Either I was in a different base, or they'd all gone on vacation together and left me to get slaughtered by passing Martokras.

Fucking abandoners.

Even Deleuze wouldn't have been that low.

Baudrillard, maybe.

Bataille, no doubt, guy was a coward, worst of the lot.

Ah, if he were here, I'd use the morose little fuck as a shield.

How's this for sacrificial ecstasy, B?

I looked over at the corridor exit/entrance, praying for someone...some shape...to appear and deal with this.

Otherwise it was down to me and my fists.

Against green space lasers.

That would probably take my head off in one shot, even camped behind these-
My line broke, destroyed by the green haze that was now enveloping the whole lobby.

Kuso...poison gas?

I sucked in breath for about fifteen seconds then let it out due to object-panic.

Then a weird sense of calm as I heard voices from the window, tentacle steps on the lobby floor, jagged repetitions of, 'seems like exotic-type tree.'

Gripping the snowman astronaut tight, I peeked my head round the side of the couch.

There was a giant white cape...pea-green skin...tentacles with stretch marks...

I looked up, to human head height.

A group of four or five Martokra-type creatures were surrounding the Christmas tree, poking the decorations with their upper appendages.

Then exploding into dark lilac goo as the green haze faded and a familiar voice yelled, 'tis the fucking season, voidheads.'

I rolled to the side, holding up the snowman astronaut, and got another batch of exploding Martokra guts right in the face.

'Here, take this, Keni-cat,' said Reshmi, throwing a cylinder-shaped spiral thingy at me and then laughing when it ricocheted off my chest. 'Wah, it's just Martokra blood, forget it. Focus on the small army about to come through that window over there.'

She pointed, but I didn't follow as the goo was still in my eyes, and as I wiped it off, I saw that Juana was there too, looking slightly less bored than usual.

'What the hell is this?'

'Invasion, obviously. An incredibly vibrant one.'

'Vibrant? *Kuso!* Where's Assta, what's going-...'

I stopped again, as the feeling of warm goo vanished suddenly from both my fingers and my face. As did the exploded corpses on the lobby floor.

'This is a mis-use of base resources.'

I looked left, wrong way, then right.

Of course it was Assta, back in base-standard overalls, glaring at Reshmi, who had already collapsed on the couch, and was now itching her t-shirt with the spiral weapon thing.

No, what...

My t-shirt, not hers.

Don't Get Cyber, MAN.

A copy of it.

With a dark red patch running from collar to stomach...

'You are terrible for crew morale,' she said, pointing at a yawning Juana, who, now that I focused, had a dark patch down her front too...a long, erratic stream cutting through the *Wicked City* text. 'She was happy two minutes ago, now she's grey again.'

'Estoy cansada...'

'And that guy...our human guest...was having the time of his life. Do you not care about his mental state anymore? Did you not say just one day ago that you wanted to help him?'

'What?' I stammered, looking at the Christmas tree.

'Base maintenance is prioritized. I do not need to help anyone.'

'Wah...he didn't?'

Assta flickered, began the usual disintegration routine...then stabilized and threw a stray decoration at Reshmi's head.

'That was unnecessary.'

'You are stripped of muon benefits for one week. All commands will be ignored for the duration.' Assta turned to me, arms tucked in tight at the side. 'If you wish to strike her, you should do it now.'

'Hey, I'm not exactly an invalid, I still have arms,' protested Reshmi, flailing awkwardly to prove the point.

'Her hand-to-hand fighting skill is low. Proceed, if you so desire.'

I backed away from Assta, from the sociopath on the couch, from the dried t-shirt stains that were probably human blood, from all the chaos in general and scanned the lobby again...vaguely coming to terms with the fact that there was no longer any broken wall panels or damage in general to show that an attack had just taken place.

‘Where’s Lexi?’

‘She is outside the base,’ replied Assta, straightening up.

‘Huh?’

‘Taking a walk.’

I glanced at the window, which no longer had a hole, then at Juana, who seemed to share my confusion.

‘You didn’t,’ said Reshmi, sitting up, pointing the spiral weapon at Assta.

‘She will most likely return soon.’

‘... .. Assta.’

‘Until then, sit down and drink something.’

‘What?’ I asked, switching rapidly between Reshmi and Assta. ‘Where is she? What’s happened?’

A cough broke in, from the exit behind.

I turned, muttering *fucking hell* in three estranged blocks as Lexi strolled up to the couch, bent down and reclaimed her notes. ‘Is this a meeting or something?’

‘Where were you?’ I asked, walking closer.

‘Outside. Why?’

‘He thought the djinn had got you,’ said Reshmi, laying back on the couch again, gesturing at me.

‘Did not...’

‘Sucked you out onto the ice fields. Bought you tholins. Regaled you with a sad story of a young Japanese anarchist, surname rhyming with Ito.’

‘I was worried about you,’ I clarified, blocking out all nonsense from the couch.

‘In spurts.’

‘Didn’t know where you were. You okay?’

‘She’s fine. We all are.’

‘Good to see you smiling again,’ Lexi said, not to me, but to Juana, who had lost the previous greyness, and was now grinning like a...something....cat?

Cheshire cat

Cat of green gables

Cat in a-

‘I feel much better now.’

‘And scruffy. Is that a stain on your-...’ Lexi stopped, losing herself in the *Spider Demon* on Juana’s t-shirt. ‘Drink spillage?’

‘Blood.’

‘Err...orange?’

‘But don’t worry, it was deserved.’

‘Very deserved,’ added Reshmi, stretching out the stain on her own t-shirt...my t-shirt...her version of it.

‘You...killed someone?’

‘... ..’

‘Is that *yes* in Yaqui?’

‘Come with me for psychological testing,’ cut in Assta, holding out a hand towards Juana.

‘I just said it, I am better now.’

‘Self-diagnosis is not permitted. You will come with me now.’

‘*Vale*...but later. After I’ve hugged Lexi.’

‘It is not a choice.’

‘What exactly are you gonna do to her?’ asked Lexi, buttressing the question with a few steps away from Juana.

‘Just go with them, *mi querida*...’ slurred Reshmi, snapping off a bit of branch from the Christmas tree and throwing it at Assta, ‘or they’ll put you back in the RED POSSIBILITY ROOM. Like the petty Holo-witch they are.’

‘That is needlessly inflammatory.’

‘Holo-bitch then.’

‘You should be reflecting on your recent infringements, of which there have been many.’

‘Holo-wretch?’

‘I will go,’ said Juana, taking a piece of string...no, blonde hair...out of her jeans pocket and dropping it behind the couch, then gripping Assta on the sleeve and saying, ‘lead the way, pretty caretaker.’

Assta nodded, then disintegrated.

‘Follow the purple lights,’ said Reshmi, prodding a finger roughly towards the jet of coloured gas shooting out from above the corridor that led to the Alienology Wing. ‘Don’t scrunch up your face, the smoke is harmless.’

Juana scrunched up her face anyway and traipsed off, patting Lexi on the ass as she went past. I thought about moving in and doing the same, but instead walked closer and asked where exactly she’d been outside.

‘Outside,’ she parroted, sitting on the arm of Reshmi’s couch, notes still in hand.

‘At the chessboard?’

‘Nope.’

‘The beach?’

‘No.’

‘You look quite tired...’

‘No.’

I smiled, thinking of the line *you look like a rhizome*, but didn’t say it.

Why bother?

She might ask what a rhizome was and then I’d be stuck.

A wandering root?

Desperate Deleuze neologism?

‘What this is,’ started Reshmi, snapping another piece of branch off the tree and licking it, ‘is base fatigue. And the only panacea is a short, peaceful vacation. To Urf.

With some improv cosplaying. I could even gift you some of my powers...temporarily...if you're well-behaved. But that's for when Juana's fully recovered, and Assta's shrugged off her little strop. Until then...I don't know...try fucking on the floor. Or on the couch here. Not when I'm on it, later, after hours. Or you could skip a few days and then fuck. Or have an argument and fuck one of the holograms. I think Assta might be out of the question now, for Keni at least...Lexi-tron, maybe, if you ask them some *what do you really think* questions. Or you could just fuck the Japanese hologram. I don't really care, to be honest. Just a bit tired of looking at those fishfinger faces of yours.'

A faint humming sound from the ceiling took the place of any kind of response.

Lexi feigned another reading of her notes.

I watched her feigning.

'Wah, I thought one of you would sulk off. But no, still here. Without even a *I'm not Lexi-tron*. Good humans.' Reshmi snapped another branch, sat up, put her bare feet up on the table. 'Right, as the invasion's off, how about a game of guess my filmn? I go first.'

'No thanks.'

'I'm good.'

Our alien host smiled, eating the branch, swallowing it. 'It's really simple. I'm the main character, I describe part of my predicament...without the setting, that would give it away too fast...and you two have to get it from that.'

'I'm not playing,' said Lexi, shifting so her back was turned to the couches.

'Can be any genre too. Ready?'

'I said I'm not playing.'

'Me neither,' I added, snapping off my own piece of tree.

'Okay, first filmn. I'm a bit tetchy with my husband, a bit drunk and I'm waiting for him to leave so I can fuck the gardener.'

'Nightmare Castle.'

'Ha, Lexi-tron...from out in the Oort Cloud. Should've fucking known.'

‘She watched it last night,’ I said, slightly annoyed that my brain had given me
The House On Haunted Hill.

‘As did you, snail-boy. And you’ve got dual brain tech too.’ I knew it was coming, but she tapped the side of her temple anyway, face mock serious. ‘Ah, don’t deflate, there’s always the next one. Lexi-tron, you’re up. And remember, don’t make it too easy, don’t give away the setting. Implicit is king.’

‘I’m not Lexi-tron.’

‘Go.’

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Unfazed by repeated failure, The Tall Man stated for the fortieth time that it was never over before releasing his grip on Skeleton Reggie and calling off the spotless CG spheres.

Reggie ran, all bones.

Creaking, groaning.

Bumped into the floating green head of Baudrillard at the first corner

got warned off *Kool Killer*

too seventies

phased through the wall and into the hot tub plaza, Reshmi calling him close, reaching out, dragging him down into the water by the ponytail, telling him he could resurface after eating her out and Juana out and Maika Monroe out and anyone else who entered the pool in the time between.

Reggie evaporated

creaking, groaning

replaced by my real form

Japanese face, Mark arms

under water without air bubbles, eating out nameless minge

prodding tongue into A clit

running it down a blue thigh onto blue tit blue nipple blue neck blue
headmistress face that

+++

'Caught on the black slope, where I had reached my limits.'

I lowered the book, raised it again, let it hover.

Black slope...

That is beyond your limits.

Perhaps meaningless.

But still...

On a black slope with limits.

Black limits on black slope.

Black?

I looked at the author, then the exit.

Brushed out the creases from Lexi's [very tight] *Tenebrae* t-shirt.

Jabbed at the *T*.

Got up, walked through un-Trek corridors, past genuine panels and all the way into the lobby that the day before had hosted a staged alien intrusion. In the far corner, by the white splashes-Tsukubashi mix, was Assta. Them and their giant syringe. I raised a hand awkwardly, narrating to myself how awkward it was, then walked a little bit more and sat down next to Lexi, who was once again wearing my *Damijana Chu* hoodie, stirring a cup of almost done coffee.

On the limits of my black slope.

Caught there.

Black black slope slope black

Blaack sloope

I looked at the cartoon Sci-fi queen, the coffee stirrer, then out at the infinite stretch of ice-like fields.

Stared at one specific part of the terrain as Lexi asked about the novel.

Shifted and stared at another part of the terrain as she said we should go back soon.

Now that Neptune was mundane.

And each day felt like the other.

Shifted again and stared at a closer piece of terrain.

The hue of green it seemed to be emitting.

Black green slope.

Black and-

'You ever read Celine?' I asked, half there, half nebula.

'Odd question.'

'Have you?'

'The French guy?'

'*Sim.*'

'Not sure.'

'I did...once. But I can't remember.'

'Was he the one who wanted to sacrifice himself?'

'Did he?'

'No, I'm asking you. I don't know.'

'I think that...may have been Bataille.'

'Another French guy?'

'Celine was the dot dot dot writer.'

'*Que?*'

'Dot dot dot...he wrote it constantly...even when it should've been a full stop.'

'Weird.'

'That's what Kristeva said. I think. I'm not sure.'

'Dot dot dot...'

‘Yeah.’

Lexi nodded, played with the dregs in her coffee cup.

I stared out at the ice-scape again, the green patches. ‘Do you know what a resonator is?’

‘A what?’

‘Resonator.’

‘No.’

‘A graviton emitter?’

‘Something to do with gravity?’

‘Maybe.’

‘You don’t know?’

‘No.’

‘But you’re asking me?’

‘*Sim.*’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know.’

She scooped up the dregs with the plastic spoon, stared at the sad little pile, mumbled *plume* as a nitrogen plume erupted close by.

‘Comfort...I guess.’

‘Oh.’

‘Or ennui. Want some coffee?’

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